

THRILLING DETECTIVE

10¢

JUNE

SABOTAGE

*A Baffling
Mystery Novel*

By **BERKELEY GRAY**

YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE HOMICIDE

An Exciting Novel

By **W. T.
BALLARD**



A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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AND STAMPS
FOR VICTORY!

INCHES FROM DEATH, THEY WORKED LIKE FIENDS!

A true story of the blitz in England as told to a War Correspondent by Arthur Letts and Frederick Rourke, gas repair men for the Thames Estuary District, Greater London.



1 "The night sky was filled with enemy planes, and the earth shook with explosions. At the height of the raid we learned a bomb had smashed a gas main near the works. Rourke and I volunteered for the fixing job..."



2 "We found it," continued Rourke. "A big delayed action bomb sitting on a severed pipe in the middle of a three-foot crater. We set to work. Letts held the flashlight, taking care to shield it so the Nazis couldn't see it, while I blocked the broken pipe with clay."



3 "In about 12 minutes the job was done. They were the longest minutes we've ever lived. We couldn't have done it without our flashlight—and the steady light from fresh batteries you can depend on."

NOTE: Bomb Squad later dealt with time bomb. The George Medal for "extreme courage and devotion to duty" was awarded to Rourke and Letts.



OCB approved flashlight regulations stipulate careful shielding of the light from a flashlight during a blackout, as Arthur Letts did. Likewise wartime economy demands strict conservation of both flashlights and batteries.

Use your flashlight sparingly—save batteries! Don't buy a new flashlight unless the old one is beyond repair! Don't hoard flashlight batteries! Don't put in a more powerful bulb than your flashlight calls for—it simply wastes power!

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Just think! You need no longer be pushed around by a brute twice your size. You need no longer be tortured with fright because you lack confidence in your own ability to take care of yourself. Your loved one can now look up to you, certain that no one will dare lay a hand on her while you're around.

WHAT IS THE SECRET? **LIGHTNING JU-JITSU**, the deadliest technique of counter-attack ever devised, the science which turns your enemy's weight and strength *against himself*. A secret weapon? Certainly! But it is a secret that is yours for the asking, to be mastered immediately. In your bare hands it becomes a weapon that shatters your attacker with the speed and efficiency of lightning ripping into a giant oak. You'll learn to throw a 200-pounder around as effortlessly as you'd toss a chair across the room.

LEARN AT ONCE! Not in weeks or months! You can master this invincible technique **NOW!** No ex-

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Our soldiers, sailors, leathernecks and fellows entering the armed forces well know that in this all-out war their very lives depend on a knowledge of all-out tactics. The Rangers and Commandos use this deadly instrument of scientific defense and counter-attack. American police and G-men, prison, bank, asylum and factory guards, and other defenders of our public safety are relying more and more upon it. Even in the schools, boys of teen age are being taught Ju-jitsu. It is not a sport, as our enemies are discovering to their sorrow. It is the crushing answer to treacherous attack. You, too, must learn to defend yourself and your loved ones as ruthlessly as our fearless, hard-hitting fighters.

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. XLVII, No. 3

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

June, 1943



A Complete Mystery Novel

SABOTAGE

By **BERKELEY GRAY**

Norman Conquest, famous English adventurer, and his companion, Joy Everard, clash with crooked munitions makers and dare death to bare a sinister Axis plot! . . . 13

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This murderer's guilt was written on his face!

and

HEADQUARTERS . . . A Department 8
Where readers, writers and the editor meet

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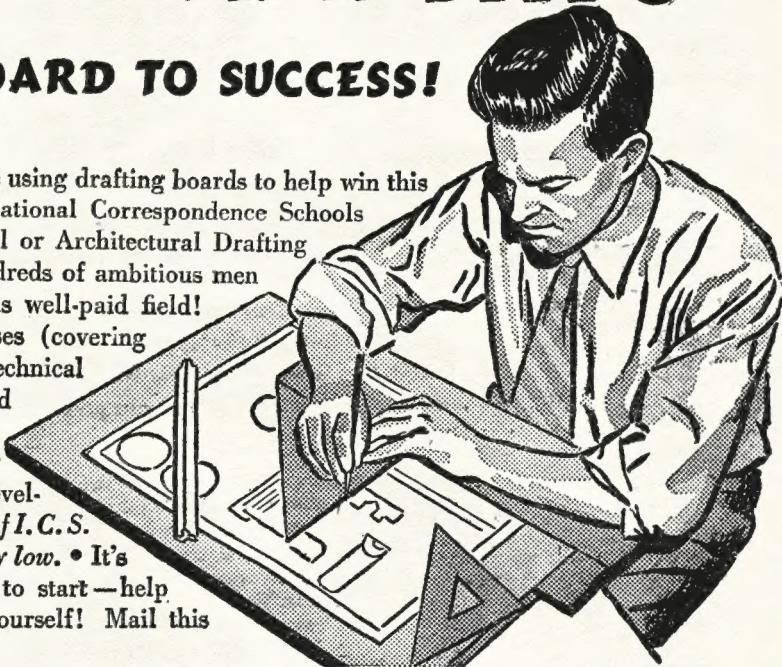


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Then, by the whip, the sword and the gallows, they will rule.

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Only our dead will be free. Only the host who will fall before the enemy will know peace.
Civilization will be set back a thousand years.

Make no mistake about it—you cannot think of this as other wars.

You cannot regard your foe this time simply as people with a wrong idea.

This time you win—or die. This time you get no second chance.

This time you free the world, or else you lose it.

Surely that is worth the best fight of your life

—worth anything that you can give or do.

Throughout the country there is increasing need for civilian war service. To enlist the help of every citizen, the Government has organized the Citizens Service Corps as part of local Defense Councils. If there is no Defense Council in your community, or if it has not set up a Service Corps, help to organize one. If one exists, cooperate with it in every possible way. Write this magazine for a free booklet telling you what to do and how to do it. Join the fight for Freedom—now!

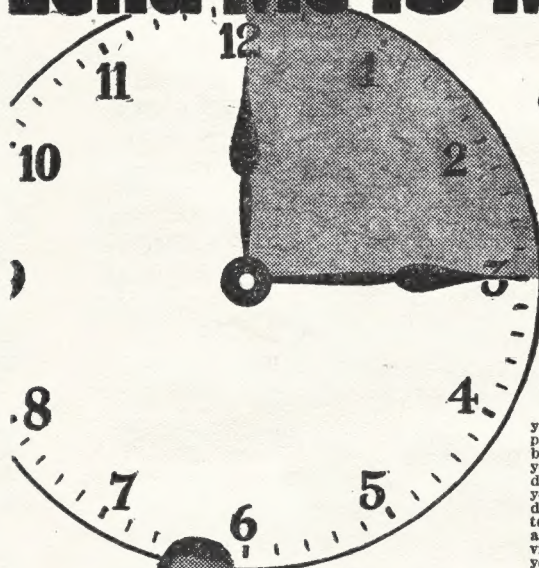
EVERY CIVILIAN A FIGHTER

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Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" **ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT.** That name is Charles Atlas!

In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his hands!

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Actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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"Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—a 2" GAIN!"
—L. A. S., Illinois

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—B. L., Oregon

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I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE and OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that there's not even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

I Was a 97-lb. Weakling

All the world knows I was **ONCE** a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And **NOW** it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of

other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is "**Dynamic Tension**," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

What 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you **ALL MAN**—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "**Dynamic Tension**" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to **LIVE!**

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☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A.



HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



A LONG about now, with the smell and feel of early summer in the air, a fellow's thoughts turn toward growing things and the almost pungent aroma of loamy soil. Riding around in one of the squad cars on patrol the other day we stopped to chat with Mike. Mike runs a filling station on the lower West Side.

With the gasoline situation what it is for the duration, Mike has found time to turn some of his attention to a Victory Garden. In the little patch of ground between his concrete driveways Mike has been growing vegetables. It was amazing the amount of stuff his tiny patch of ground has been yielding—cabbages, potatoes and tomatoes.

You know, there are probably a lot of Mikes scattered around the country who, in the aggregate, are piling up a sizeable amount of edible things to help in our all-out war effort. Of course, everybody hasn't a lot of ground to work with, especially you folks in the crowded cities. However, one of the big department stores here in New York recently featured a window display in which it was shown that two persons can raise enough vegetable stuff to supply their needs for three months in an eight-foot by ten-foot plot.

The Silent Bullet

So, as soon as the desk sergeant comes down from the roof and washes the soil from his hands, we'll examine the blotter and see what Headquarters can offer in the way of a fiction crop. Oh, yes, we always harvest a bumper crop of thrills for **THRILLING DETECTIVE**. Let's see what we can reap for our next issue.

July brings us a featured novel by Verne Chute called **DEATH HIRES A CAR**. It starts off like this:

In the six months since the police had released him from jail and considerably restored his chauffeur's license, Duke Greer had had many strange fares. But none quite as strange as this.

He waited in his for-rent limousine outside a two-story rooming house on Burdett just off Kearney, puffed at an oval cigarette and growled:

"The rest of this trip'll probably take me out of town—just when I've got a good game lined up with Tom and the boys tonight."

But Duke Greer needn't have worried. He wasn't going out of town that night. And he wasn't going to play poker. One of his three passengers, the small and sallow man with the furtive look, lay dead in a squalid room upstairs, a silenced bullet through his heart.

And that's how Duke Greer gets off to a running start in **DEATH HIRES A CAR**. Already under a sort of cloud with the police department, he finds himself sunk to the ears in a nasty murder frame. One thing only leads to another for the harassed public chauffeur as he goes into action to clear himself of grave trouble before the cops hang this rap on him.

You will find the plot of this story quite out of the ordinary as you follow Duke Greer on the maddest motor trip of his life. And then there was the girl! Elaine Philips, the girl in the blue turban and with the wonderful eyes. She complicates things until Greer is almost crazy—but see if you don't agree with Duke when he finds the prize worth the game.

Peanuts to You

And, as for the novelet next issue—that hard-boiled, peanut-chewing detective man is here again. Willie Brann, that fascinating private investigator created by Benton Braden,

(Continued on page 10)



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There's probably an opportunity right in your neighborhood to make money in spare time fixing Radios. I'll give you the training that has started hundreds of N.R.I. students making \$5, \$10 a week extra within a few months after enrolling. The N.R.I. Course isn't something just prepared to take advantage of the present market for technical books and courses. It has been tried, tested, developed, perfected during the 28 years we have been teaching Radio.

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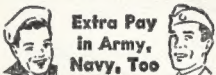
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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 8)

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(Concluded on page 97)



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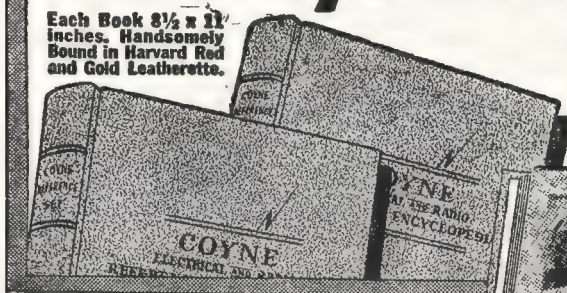
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Norman Conquest dug his knuckles with scientific accuracy into the guard's carotid arteries

SABOTAGE

By BERKELEY GRAY

Norman Conquest, famous English adventurer, and his companion Joy Everard clash with crooked munitions makers and dare death to bare a sinister Axis plot on Long Island!

CHAPTER I

GLANFORD'S MIDNIGHT VISITOR

ALONE in the library of his Edge-water house, Preston Glanford dropped an inch and a half of Corona-Corona—roughly, about fifty cents' worth—into his pearl-inlaid, fumeless ashtray and yawned. The clock in the hall was striking midnight. Time to hit the hay—or, to be more accurate,

the triple-spring bed, complete with silken sheets and pillows, which the famous promoter used as a substitute. Glanford was clean-shaved, poker-faced and forty years old.

In hoisting his squat, muscular figure out of the padded leather desk-chair, he raised his fishlike blue eyes to a higher level. Then those same eyes, already prominent, bulged dangerously and became glassily fixed.

A BAFFLING COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

Glanford found he was no longer alone in the ornate library. He had a visitor—six feet of lithe, good-looking, smiling visitor, in fact. The unannounced midnight guest was leaning nonchalantly against the angle of a window recess, his raincoat partially open, revealing immaculate evening dress, his soft hat tilted carelessly back, and a coil of lazy blue smoke rising from his cigarette.

"Don't go, Brother Glanford," said Norman Conquest softly. "You remember me, surely?"

Glanford rested his powerful hands on the padded arms of the chair, temporarily suspended all animation. Great wealth had not made Glanford soft. He had been careful of that. Daily exercise kept him in the pink of physical condition.

"How did you get in?"

Glanford's quick mind, stunned for a moment, was working again. He began to add, calculate, infer. "No, I don't remember you. Who are you, a burglar?"

"Does that matter?" drawled the one hundred and sixty-four pounds of dynamite known as the Gay Desperado. He detached himself from the niche and strolled farther into the room. "My mode of entry should be obvious. There's a window directly behind me. And what are windows for, except to get into houses."

"Hardly, young man," sneered Glanford. "Doors usually are to be preferred." He sank back into the chair and laid down the cigar, ready for action. "Now that you have mentioned it, I do seem to recall your face. But a chance meeting hardly excuses this unwarrantable intrusion."

FROM the intruder came an impatient interruption.

"Forget those long words; I was only educated at Eton," said Norman Conquest. "Let me jog your memory. The last time we met, the only time we met, was some weeks ago at Nicholas Glibley's place in Hampton Bays, Long Island. The night he—died. You remember? I'm the bloke who asked your advice on the subject of art. Later it had been my intention to return to England, but I delayed my departure strictly on your account, friend Glanford. You should feel flattered."

Glanford remembered the occasion clearly but it did not suit him to say so. He wrinkled his brow as though striving to open the gates of recollection.

"Why, yes, of course. Yes," he said severely, "I remember you now. You insinuated yourself into poor Glibley's house on a pretext of showing me an old print. Is this another of your ridiculous practical jokes?"

"Relax, Brother Glanford; this is not one of my funny nights," said Norman Conquest. "I'm here to offer congratulations on your noble and public-spirited national work as managing director of the Midland Equipment Corporation. Any man who supplies the American Army and expeditionary forces with gas masks—two million of these a mere first instalment—automatically steps right into the rôle of Public Benefactor Number One," continued Conquest, seating himself on a corner of the desk. "I think two million is the number? Hitherto, I have wronged you, friend Glanford."

"Someone once informed me that you were a Nazi sympathizer and a backer of the Bund, when it was prospering in the United States. What an infamous slander! And here you were a true patriot all the time. They also say you manufacture other items for the boys going overseas. I further understand another five million masks are now in process of manufacture at one of your plants. Great going, Preston, old chap! You'll excuse the look of awed admiration in my eyes, but that's the way I feel."

Glanford relaxed.

"We all—ah—try to do our bit," he said, with a deprecatory air. "In these hectic days we must all do our bit to help crush foreign oppression."

"Naturally patriotism is a subject right up your street," nodded Norman Conquest. "But let us return to these respirators of yours." He drew from the capacious pockets of his raincoat two of the gas masks in question. "I had two objects in making this call, O Public Benefactor. First, to congratulate you on your smooth work; secondly, to ask you to give me a personal demonstration of the mask's efficiency. Here are two samples of the gas masks you have manufactured for the boys in Africa and Guadalcanal."



The Coast Guard party fired a hasty volley

AT THE sight of the masks the wealthy manufacturer and financier could not repress a guilty start. His bulgy eyes fixed themselves upon the apparatus which had been designed to protect American soldiers from poison gas.

"Is this a joke?" he snarled, angrily. "If so, you are wasting time. Who are you anyway? I seem to recognize your face—I've seen it in the newspapers somewhere—but I can't recall your name."

"My name is associated with a notable date in English history," said the smiling young visitor. "The year of Ten Sixty-six, to be exact. If you have any memory of school days, that hint should be enough."

"Ten Sixty-six," repeated Glanford, in meditative tones. "Ah, I have it. The Norman Conquest of Britain." He gave another start and leveled his bulgy eyes at the intruder. "And I know you, too. You're that notorious young scoundrel, Norman Conquest, sometimes called the Gay Desperado, whose law-breaking career is a scandal of two continents. It's a shame and disgrace that you haven't been hanged before this, young man."

"You flatter me, sir," said Conquest, with an ironical nod.

"Now explain your extraordinary behavior," demanded Glanford.

"My extraordinary behavior has just started," smiled Norman Conquest, selecting one of the masks and offering it to Glanford. "How about putting this thing on and improving the looks of your face?"

Glanford promptly pushed it back and swore with some violence.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," he bellowed. "This imbecility has gone far enough. Leave this house at once or I'll summon the police." He reached for the desk telephone but halted his hand. For as if by magic an automatic appeared in Conquest's fist, and the muzzle was pointing at Glanford's forehead. Conquest continued to smile.

"But, my dear old gas-mask manufacturer, I want you to demonstrate," Conquest pointed out. "Putting one of these things on is simple, isn't it? I'm just dying to see how you look. I'll put one on, too, to keep you company. It won't take a minute, and then I'll go."

"It's rank absurdity!" protested Glanford, watching the gun and not liking the glitter he detected in Conquest's eye. "Anybody knows how to fit a gas mask. However, since you've promised to go and to cut short the argument, I'll don it for a moment or two."

He picked up the respirator gingerly, as though it might turn and bite him, and adjusted it to his face. Norman Conquest, smiling encouragingly, slipped on the other one. But he held the mouthpiece away from his lips so that he could still talk. He nodded with approval as he surveyed the goggle-eyed apparition on the other side of the desk.

"Everything fixed?" he inquired.

Preston Glanford nodded.

"Good!" said Norman Conquest.

"Let's go!"

He reached across and brought his gloved hand down with some force on his host's ornate blotting pad. There was a little shivering crash as the glass container in his palm smashed, and a cloud of yellow evil-looking vapor rolled up from the desk and commenced to wrap itself affectionately around Preston Glanford.

"Poison gas," explained Norman, backing away from the danger zone. "The real stuff, brother—guaranteed to kill snakes, slugs, and even crooked company-promoters, with one puff."

Preston Glanford, making muffled gurgling noises like a partially-clogged waste-pipe, gave a leap to the rear. The chair toppled over and thudded to the carpet. Glanford, staggering toward the window and wrenching at his gas mask, was now making noises like an elephant getting its foot out of a swamp. The swiftness of his movements had caused the gas cloud to follow him.

"Fool! Madman!" he screamed, at last getting the mask free. "You'll kill us both! You'll—gug-gugh—"

HIS frantic, even panic-stricken, activity suggested a regrettable lack of faith in the efficacy of his own wares. Apparently, he did not think the gas masks were so hot.

Norman Conquest, carefully adjusting his own respirator, no longer smiled. He stood quite still, watching.

Glanford had been foolish in discarding the apparatus for it might have afforded him partial protection at least.

Finding his face free, he took a deep, gulping breath. In spite of his acrobatics, the gas cloud still stayed with him. He clutched desperately at the air, and finding this of no avail he clutched desperately at his throat. Not a bit of good. The stuff was right in amongst him. His knees folded and he sank to the carpet like a shot-spattered rabbit.

The suspicion-lights in the Gay Desperado's eyes hardened into twin points of ice-cold conviction. Millions of gas masks for the protection of soldiers fighting at the front, and every one of those masks a dud! And Preston Glanford, who was responsible for their manufacture, had known they were duds!

Norman Conquest, by his sudden and unexpected "test," had panicked Glanford into a showdown. He had procured both masks from a consignment bound for overseas. One of them—the mask he was wearing—he had modified. It gave him complete protection from the harmless knock-out gas which the little glass tube had contained. This gas had now spread itself throughout the richly furnished room like a thin fog.

Through his agents Conquest had learned how defective masks were slipped into the consignments in large numbers. Glanford was wealthy with every means to carry out such a deception money could supply. Elaborate testing devices had been rigged up, fake "poison" gas had been smuggled into laboratories and depots, agents and inspectors had been bribed.

Some of the masks had been up to specifications but the vast majority had been constructed of inferior materials, furnishing a good fat profit to Glanford.

Yet it was not profit which had influenced Glanford to take such a perilous risk of discovery and disgrace. It was the fact that he hated the country of his birth, that his sympathies were entirely with Hitler and the Axis Powers. Through Nazi representatives he had been promised a fat post at the right hand of the dictators when America had been conquered, control over a large number of fellow Americans. Glanford fancied himself as another Quisling.

Norman Conquest's first act was to cross swiftly to the door and turn the key in the lock. Then he knelt beside the

unconscious man and deftly extracted a leather case of keys. The desk, he had already seen, was barren of all papers. But the drawers promised better prospects. He opened them, one after another, examining their contents expertly, disturbing nothing. He had fifteen clear minutes, perhaps more.

CHECKBOOKS, passbooks. He gave them a quick onceover. He found a cablegram bearing the current date, dispatched from South America. Norman Conquest's face hardened. He read the cablegram again:

LETTER RECEIVED. LEAVING ALEXANDRIA BY IMPERIAL FLYING-BOAT TODAY. BE WITH YOU TOMORROW.
MORTIMER.

Mortimer?

Could this be, by any chance, Geoffrey Mortimer, of tea fame? The quartz-gray eyes behind the mask glistened like Arctic ice. All along there had been a suspicion in Conquest's mind that "Uncle Mortimer" had had other interests in addition to the tea business and gem smuggling.

It was a good many weeks since this young crook-baiter had crushed Geoffrey Mortimer, and he had believed Mortimer was attending to his legitimate business of importing and selling tea. But supposing Mortimer and Glanford and Nicholas Glibley were colleagues in the same gigantic Axis plot? Or, rather, supposing they had been? Glibley was dead.

Norman Conquest knew this well enough, for he had killed Glibley in self-defense, to save his own life. He had slung Nicholas Glibley over the side of his own yacht, the *White Corsair*. Norman Conquest had been forced to wreck the yacht by sending her crashing into a sunken hulk in a lonely estuary off the coast of Long Island when the yacht had developed a list.

Since then, Norman Conquest's conscience gave him no twinge, for Glibley had been despicable. It was rumored Glibley had made a specialty of luring important Norwegian refugees aboard his yacht and then turning them over to Nazi U-boats at sea for transportation to Germany. The coroner's jury, knowing nothing of the actual facts, had brought in a verdict of "death by mis-

adventure," and had let it go at that.

Tonight, Norman Conquest had determined to apply the acid test to Preston Glanford. This shrewd, unscrupulous and—it now turned out—traitorous manufacturer, financier and promoter, had been a guest in Nicholas Glibley's Hampton Bays house on a hectic night when Norman had rescued Joy Everard and a dozen former Norway officials from Glibley's clutches. Conquest had nothing against Preston Glanford then. But he did have now. His suspicions of those gas masks were confirmed. He had been right.

But who was this Mortimer who sent cablegrams from South America? It seemed a matter which needed immediate investigation. Norman Conquest's interest in the whole matter became fourfold. He continued his examination of Preston Glanford's effects with genuine enthusiasm. The desk yielded no further information so he turned his attention to the safe. A considerable sum of money in hard cash and a sheaf of German war bonds caused him to snarl like a Russian soldier at the sight of a Nazi tank operator. For an instant he had an impulse to tear the stuff to shreds but he mastered the temptation. It was essential Preston Glanford should remain in blissful ignorance of these investigative activities of Conquest.

A prize really worth while at last came into his hands when he opened a plain japanned steel deed-box. Letters; copies of letters. He quickly glanced over them. One in particular held his attention. And a low chuckle of peccant joy arose in his throat as he skimmed the lines:

Dear Mortimer—

Imperative as it is that you should return at once, I dared not give you the real reason by cable. Even in a letter I must be guarded in what I say. You know that poor Glibley is dead, but you don't know a young scamp named Conquest was responsible. Impossible to give information against him, however, too risky. A situation of intense gravity has arisen in consequence of Conquest's interference. It is far too dangerous to put into writing. I need only say the issues are vital and you must return immediately and by the quickest method. You'll find it quite safe, for your tea warehouse fire has been forgotten.

Norman Conquest's eyes took in the gist of this letter, a carbon copy of one

which Glanford sent to Geoffrey Mortimer, with the speed of light. His jaw jutted out like the prow of a Hudson's Bay Company's ice-breaker. He glanced round.

A slight movement had told him that Glanford was in process of being returned to circulation. Carefully, silently, Norman scanned the other letters and documents which had reposed in the deed-box; and his eyes burned with reckless bliss. He put everything back. He had seen enough. Within a minute the safe was locked, the keys were back in Preston Glanford's pocket and the library door unlocked.

CHAPTER II

AN UNDERSEA BRUSH WITH DEATH



WHEN Preston Glanford sat up he found himself breathing heavily through his gas-mask. A cool draught was blowing on his face. The window was wide open, and in a collapsed heap just underneath it lay the still form of Norman Conquest.

Once fully conscious, Glanford's brain cleared rapidly. When he rose shakily to his feet he was surprised and relieved to find that, with the exception of a slight dizziness, he was all present and correct. He removed the gas-mask cautiously, and discovered no trace of deadly fumes. Next he caught sight of the motionless figure by the window, and his eyes took on such a glassily baleful glare that, as he stood transfixed, he was not unlike a stuffed man-eating tiger.

"Blasted young fool," he snarled, moving toward the man on the floor.

His voice, cutting into the silence, appeared to have a magical effect upon Norman Conquest. He sat up, hands groping, wrenched the gas-mask from his face, and rose to his feet.

"Marvelous!" said Conquest, his voice charged with respectful admiration.

"Eh?"

"The demonstration. I don't mind telling you I went the limit in staging it." As he spoke, Conquest collected both respirators and stowed them away in his pockets. "It's a good thing I pushed your face back into that mask,

old chap, or you'd have been dead in no time."

Preston Glanford, who was opening and shutting his mouth like an oxygen-starved goldfish, failed to produce any worth-while dialogue.

"These masks of yours must be the final syllable in efficiency," said Norman Conquest, with convincing enthusiasm. "Do you know what that gas was? Trichloromethyl-chloroformate, y o u think? Chloromethyl-chloroformate, you hazard? Phosgene-chlorine-hydrocyanic-dichloromethyl-ether, peradventure?" He paused for a moment to massage his jaw. "Forget them all, my dear old Gas-Mask King. They are just like so much eau-de-Cologne compared to the noggin of liquid death I packed in that glass tube. And your mass-produced masks protected us so completely we only passed out for a mere minute or two, and came out of it without even an itch or a rash. Congratulations, Glanny! You ought to be frothing with yeasty pride!"

HE WAVED a cheerful farewell, stepped to the window, and vanished as he had come. But Preston Glanford, maker of military equipment, was not frothing with yeasty pride.

All he could do at the moment was to sweat like a pig.

An hour later, Joy Everard was in the living-room of a cottage in New Rochelle when Norman Conquest strolled in.

"One o'clock and all's well," he announced, tossing his hat across the room and draping himself on the comfortable deep-seated lounge. "Pixie, my child, I've been having great fun. Poison gassing war equipment makers,

reading their bankbooks and private correspondence."

He had never ceased to wonder at the efficiency of this lovely blond girl. Since she had thrown up her job as Geoffrey Mortimer's private secretary to become Norman's partner in daring adventure, again and again she had proved she possessed the same buccaneering spirit which bubbled so exuberantly in Norman Conquest.

Before he had had time to finish his cigarette, she had conjured up a piping-hot platter of broiled steak and potatoes. And she smilingly listened while he gave her a racy and flamboyant account of his recent activities.

"Thus, my nimble sprite, we are all set for the gong," he said as he sat back and lighted a cigarette. "Round Three is about to begin."

"Round Three?" repeated Joy. "Then what became of Round Two?"

"Our little brush with the Glibley pestilence was Round Two," explained Norman Conquest. "We regarded it as Round One at the time, because, quite wrongly we had marked off the Mortimer entertainment as a separate episode. As we now know, it wasn't. Mortimer is one of the Septic Three. Preston Glanford's letter to him is what a detective novelist would call highly significant. It shows that he, too, is one of the three, although I didn't suspect it until tonight. In other words, it is evil stuff indeed. Reading all the indications, and taking them from left to right, we can now form a pretty fair idea of the set-up."

He lay back in his chair, allowing the smoke to drift lazily out of his nostrils. But his eyes danced with amusement.

[Turn page]



"This wacky organization is big, with several main branches, each under its own departmental head," he continued easily. "Number One, Brother Glanford, safe and solid, hobnobbing with the highest. He handles the Big Graft, which means, State secrets, fat Government contracts, and so on."

"But how can a manufacturer, even one so wealthy and prominent as Preston Glanford, dare to take such risks in war time?" asked Joy. "Sooner or later those bad gas masks are bound to be discovered, and then it means the electric chair."

"Depend upon it Glanford has framed it up so that someone else will get all the blame, Pixie," answered Conquest. "Such things have happened too often in his past life to leave me any doubt on that score. He's already picked out a scapegoat and when the F.B.I. gets on to the game, Glanford will slip out of the coils like an eel. He's an expert at making others take the rap."

"What a horrible beast," said the girl, with a shudder. "But you mentioned three men. Who is Number Two?"

"Number Two is Uncle Mortimer," smiled Conquest, whose smile had become somewhat grim. "His job was to help make the scheme pay by smuggling in illicit diamonds from Germany along with his tea shipments. Anything to harass the country and help the Nazis. He skipped out after I'd put a crimp in his racket."

"We naturally saw nothing of Mortimer during the Glibley episode, and that fooled us. Mortimer, being abroad, was equally ignorant of our own activities. We now come to Number Three—Nicholas Glibley. He was in charge of the refugee kidnaping end of the game. Thanks to our modest efforts, that branch of the business is finished. Glibley has cashed in his checks, and gone to the place where all sinners go. So where, exactly, do we stand?"

"That's just what I'm waiting to hear," said Joy. "Incidentally, it's two o'clock."

"We stand on the verge of the biggest package of fun yet," said Norman Conquest. "Uncle Mortimer will be back tomorrow, and he and Brother Glanford will get together. In passing, we've got to think of something ripe and juicy

in connection with those gas masks. Think of it, Pixie! A million or more dud masks, filled with coke and sawdust, instead of charcoal and pumice and hexamethylenetetramine and all the latest improvements. And another five million in course of manufacture—and still more to come if he could get away with it that long. This Glanford blister is simply a potential mass murderer."

Norman Conquest paused and crushed his cigarette stub. Joy considered the action as a portent.

"But the masks can wait," went on the Gay Desperado. "Tomorrow we start a private war. I told you of the letters and documents I found in Glanford's safe, didn't I? It seems that this crooked promoter has bought up the Hampton Bays estate, Sea View, and the sunken hulk of the *White Corsair*, the house and yacht of Glibley, his recently departed partner in crime. The thing we've got to ask ourselves is: why has he bought them?"

"In one of these letters was the suggestive sentence: 'Sea View has been turned inside out and we haven't found it. We are hoping it will turn up in the strong room of the wreck, but this means diving operations.' In another letter we find the significant phrase: 'A situation of intense gravity has arisen, and I need only say the issues are vital.' What does this suggest to your agile mind, pardner?"

"Glibley had possession of something of tremendous importance; Glibley died suddenly and unexpectedly," replied Joy. "He was unable to pass on the secret to his partners, so they're in a spot."

"Agile," said Norman approvingly, "was right. It is my belief some extremely incriminating document has been lost, and poor Uncle Glanford is fretting."

During the course of the next day Norman Conquest visited one of his confidential agents and acquired the latest thing in self-contained diving-suits.

"It's only intended for use in comparatively shallow water," he said to Joy later, when he was demonstrating and getting himself accustomed to the apparatus. "Perfectly simple and fool-proof. Here's the portable oxygen-con-

tainer with a full hour's supply, and I've got spares. This gadget is the control-valve. No air-pipes or life-lines. Diving Made Easy. Tonight, Pixie, we're going on a boat trip."

When evening had closed in, Norman Conquest packed the diving gear into the rear of the car which he had also borrowed from the agent who happened to be also an undercover man for the F.B.I., and headed for a quiet inlet of the Long Island coast. Joy Everard, in the seat beside Norman, her animated face illumined by the instrument-panel lights, knew well that this mission was technically lawless. But she accepted it all as part of the destiny which had been hers since meeting up with the amazing young adventurer who lounged behind the steering-wheel.

NOT five miles from Hampton Bays Norman slid the powerful car along a narrow track and then into a lonely dip where the dark surface of a half-forgotten backwater reflected the stars. A small boathouse stood beside the creek, and the boathouse contained a useful motor-launch.

"A little property one of my men acquired some weeks ago," explained Norman Conquest, as he carried the diving apparatus aboard. "Just as well to have these things ready in advance. Saves trouble. I had a hunch we should visit these parts again."

"Well, it's a good night for diving," said Joy. "I hope you know how to use that suit in real water, Desperado. Because, if you don't, I might have to do some diving on my own account, without any suit at all."

"It won't come to that," Norman assured her. "All set? Good! We're off!"

The motor was so discreet it scarcely more than whispered. And the little launch went gliding smoothly out into the open inlet. Here and there, on the other side of the open water, shaded lights twinkled. From the direction of the sea came the occasional tolling of a bell-buoy.

Norman kept the launch fairly close to the black shore-line. Presently, out of the mysterious darkness loomed a bulky and shapeless mass, which soon turned into the squat masts, funnel and superstructure of the sunken yacht, *White Corsair*. The luxury vessel had

founded in shallow water on a fairly even keel. The hulk was well clear of all the recognized navigation channels.

"This is going to be dead easy," murmured Norman as he shut off the engine and allowed the launch to glide like a ghost towards the wreck. "More like a picnic than anything else."

He tied up to the starboard bridge-rail, which, owing to a slight list, was just awash. Quickly and expertly, he proceeded to get into the light diving-suit. It was luck they spoke in low voices; it was by chance they failed to explore the other side of the wreck.

"Tide's on the ebb," he said to Joy. "I made sure of the times. That's why there's so much of the junk above the surface. It'll be an hour before the tide starts coming in. Tons of time. Well, Pixie, I'll be signing on."

"You get all the fun," said Joy wistfully.

He fixed on the headpiece, locked it, and operated the oxygen valve. Entirely untrammelled by air-pipes or lifelines, he grasped the bridge-rail and lowered himself; and he did not vanish completely beneath the surface until he reached the bridge ladder and commenced descending it.

Down on the deck level he had no difficulty in getting his bearings, for, on a certain celebrated occasion, he had made himself familiar with the yacht's arrangements. He could see well, too, for there was a miniature searchlight fitted into the top of the metal helmet, and this was sending a powerful beam into the greenish water.

Keeping his balance turned out to be something of a trick. He staggered towards the saloon staircase like a slow-motion drunkard. But breathing proved easy and comfortable, and the escape-valve was working smoothly, with streams of little bubbles rising merrily to the surface.

Norman Conquest's mood became as effervescent as those rising bubbles. He was putting one over on the opposition. If he could be a move ahead in the game, he was doing swell, and he had a shrewd idea the *White Corsair's* strong-room contained something worth gold untold to the two survivors of the Septic Three.

HIS present idea was to give the wreck a general once-over, locate

the strong-room and find out just what high explosive would be necessary to get it open. He descended the staircase without trouble, appreciating more than ever the mobile handiness of his diving suit.

The saloon stretched before him, a mysterious expanse of greenish murk, with an eerie suggestion of movement just beyond the range of the searchlight. Moving fishes, no doubt. He noticed a curious effect of faintly reflected light through the open door of the magnificent stateroom that had been Nicholas Glibley's private den.

Norman Conquest reached the doorway and found progress difficult. A strong current was eddying and swirling through it, and tending to sweep his feet from under him. The water, too, seemed disturbed and strangely sludgy, so that Conquest could see nothing beyond hand-range. It resembled a trip through a dense fog. He suspected a gap in the vessel's side, through which the tide was running.

He found it difficult, almost impossible, to make progress straight across the open floor of the stateroom, but by working his way round the paneled wall, helping himself along by grasping at every likely protuberance, he eventually got to the far end. He had been in this stateroom once only, and on that occasion, in somewhat of a hurry, but he seemed to remember an extra large panel in the wall of the room opposite the door. He had an idea if he could get that panel moving he would find the strong room behind it.

He turned at the angle of the wall, and the searchlight in his helmet swung around. Even Norman Conquest's strong nerves were tested for a moment when he saw his grotesque figure reflected in a mirror not a single pace away. Then he laughed. For a heart-stopping second he had believed it was no reflection at all. He laughed again. His first impression had been right.

It was not a reflection!

He was within arm's reach of a diver who had been on the spot for some time, judging by the size of the jagged hole he had cut into the door of the strong room. The Gay Desperado knew he was not looking at a reflection of himself, because his opposite number carried a hoselike apparatus in his right hand,

and both of Norman Conquest's hands were empty.

"Nice night!" shouted Conquest, waving his arm.

He regretted the pleasantry when he saw the start of the man in the other diving suit. He also saw the convulsive clutch of the fellow's hand as he jerked his apparatus breast high.

Something about the way he did it spelled death or disaster for Norman Conquest!

CHAPTER III

A BATTLE UNDER THE SEA



AS CONQUEST lashed out, he knew what the apparatus was—a super-pressure blow lamp that could be operated under water. Luckily, for the moment, the flame was out. Conquest also suddenly discovered that his lashing fist was about as useful as a sponge. If there had been any zip in it at all, no trace remained by the time the fist reached its destination. The lunging movement swept him around helplessly. He caught a glimpse of the other man's eyes behind the glass window of his helmet—and he saw murder.

Zzzzzzzh!

A hissing, searing blue flame suddenly gushed out of the nozzle of the blow lamp, and Norman Conquest thus learned this particular apparatus had some device for getting it going under water. Not that he had much time to reflect on the matter at the moment. The appearance of the naked flame slicing through solid wetness was fascinating; but not half so fascinating as the direction which the flame was taking. It swung slowly round in an arc and played in a high-pressure jet on Norman Conquest's side. Sluggishly the Gay Desperado tried to dodge.

Swift ankle work was definitely out. Conquest lunged back as he felt the terrific heat penetrating the fabric of his suit, and he experienced that nightmare sensation of running madly and getting nowhere. His movement was clumsy and slow. All the time the searchlight in his helmet was blazing into his silent adversary's eyes. In them he could read the message of death.

Conquest's brain worked like light-

ning. If he got out of this alive—and something in the feel of his side told him that the odds were a million to one against it—he would never be nearer to the Great Veil without actually penetrating it.

Ideas raced through his mind. Somehow he had managed to swerve out of range of the destroying flame. He had one object—the preservation of his life. A born fighter, Norman Conquest was in no mood to fight now. The situation resembled that of an unarmed man facing a killer with a machine-gun. Any attempt to continue such an unequal contest would have been wilful suicide. Taking a deep breath, he reached up and wrenched his helmet free. Water gushed in a flood through the ragged tear in his diving suit. The flame had not penetrated; he was scarcely scorched, but the fabric of his suit had perished. Wrenching off the helmet caused it to tear like rotten paper.

The next few moments were hectic.

With a wriggling twist that would have excited the envy of a healthy young eel, Conquest thrust his head out of the shoulder-piece. In the next fractional second he had eased his arms out of the sleeves. Now he made a supreme effort. With his ears thundering and drumming, with his lungs strained, he kicked and twisted and yanked. Somehow, he never knew just how, his body tore free. Norman Conquest had dived for pearls in the South Seas. Any shark could have watched him at work under water and learned a trick or two.

Free of the useless and encumbering diving suit he shot across the stateroom. Here the swift flow of the current which had so hindered his entrance made his exit more or less inevitable. That eddying flow probably saved his life. He shot through into the saloon—into inky darkness. Instinct alone took him to the staircase. There he rose like a cork and shot loose of all the entanglements.

Up and up. It wasn't far. After a slight collision with a corner of the bridge he broke the surface of the inlet. Always something pleasant and invigorating can be found in the ozone-charged night air of the sea, but the Gay Desperado had never so appreciated its finer qualities until now!

He filled his lungs luxuriously, shook

his head, and opened his eyes. He had come up on the shore side of the wreck not two fathoms away from a boat which was attached to the rusty side of an old hulk. Norman Conquest remembered that hulk. He had wrecked the *White Corsair* by sending her bow-on into it at full speed.

The boat contained four or five men. Two others were standing on the sunken superstructure, flashing torchlights in his direction. Conquest had a whimsical impulse and, without thinking, he succumbed to it.

"Come on in," he called out. "The water's fine."

EVEN as he spoke, he realized his error for the men with the torches produced guns while the men in the launch cranked up the engine. It was heavily powered for speed.

The boat darted in his direction and the gunmen opened fire. Conquest dived. As he went down again he began to wonder if he hadn't fallen into a pretty serious mess. Expert swimmer though he was, he could never elude those killers in the boat. Also what would happen to Joy Everard if they discovered her on the other side of the yacht?

When he came to the surface, he took a deep breath and submerged again, this time heading away from the *White Corsair* in an effort to draw pursuit off from Joy Everard. When he popped his head into air, a couple of minutes later, he received a sickening surprise, for the men were almost upon him. They blazed away with their guns the minute his face appeared. Close up, there was light enough for them to see without the electric torches.

The crack of exploding cartridges echoed across the silence of the inlet.

Then, in the nick of time, came a diversion, a life-saver for Norman Conquest. Nearby there was a small pier and on this wharf a group of men in the uniforms of Coast Guards, appeared. With them was a man in civilian clothes and a fedora. Moored to the wharf Conquest also noticed a motorboat.

"There they are," said the F. B. I. man. "I told you they were armed and suspicious looking." Then in louder tones. "Hi, there! What are you doing around that old wreck?"

The hoodlums did not wait for an answer. The man at the helm yanked at the wheel and changed the course, sending it toward the mouth of the inlet. Water boiled up in the wake as he jammed on power. The boat went roaring away.

The Coast Guard party needed only that hint. They fired a hasty volley. Then leaping into their boat, they started the motor and started in pursuit. At barked commands they made ready a sub-machine gun.

"Stop, if you value your lives!" warned the Coast Guard officer. "Stop or we fire!"

The next minute the two boats had disappeared around a projecting spit of land. Next came the rattle of explosions as the machine-gun went into action.

Norman Conquest, treading water, cool and nonchalant, gazed after them.

"Good-by little playmates," he called out, in the direction of the battle. "Uncle Sam will attend to you."

Then he turned and slowly swam back to the place where he had left Joy Everard. He found her awaiting him in the shelter of the sunken hulk.

"Start the engine and put zip into it, Pixie," he called out.

She obeyed on the instant. As Norman Conquest reached up and grasped the side of the launch's cockpit, the little vessel leaped into motion.

"Who did the shooting and what became of the diving suit?" she asked.

"Some of friend Glanford's pals were responsible for the shooting," explained Conquest. "A coast guard sub-chaser drove them away. As for the diving-suit, it was too tight under the arms, like ready-made suits are when they have been badly fitted. Give me that wheel and duck."

He sent the launch across the dark water, back in the direction he had come. As he did so another gun began to spit fire from the sunken wreck. It was the diver who had tried to kill Conquest with the blow flame and a companion. Soon darkness hid the launch and the firing stopped. Norman Conquest sat up, dripping.

"A hot night, Pixie," he observed. "But unless I'm mistaken things are going to be hotter yet before we're through."

An hour later, when Joy Everard had been safely hidden away in Conquest's boat house, he was pressed tightly on the roof of the home of the late Nicholas Glibley listening in on an interesting conversation.

Sea View, the fine mansion which Glibley had built, stood black and silent, and, apparently, empty, in its once neatly kept grounds.

BUT Sea View was not as empty as it looked. In the library, behind curtained windows, two anxious men were sitting in large chairs—they needed large chairs—waiting for news. Two other men, considerably lesser lights, lounged and smoked in the hall. Outside, on the neglected drive, stood the handsome limousine which had brought Geoffrey Mortimer to the house. Mortimer, in fact, had arrived only a short time before.

"What you've told me, Glanford, is staggering," he was saying, his piglike eyes shifty with apprehension behind their horn-rimmed spectacles. "I heard of Glibley's death, of course, and I knew there had been trouble, but I never dreamed that this young scoundrel, Conquest, was responsible. Glibley was a fool to keep written records of our operations. I warned him again and again but he said it was necessary."

"Pull yourself together, Mortimer," interrupted Glanford. "We're going to find Glibley's record book. Quit acting like a terrified child. Glibley was the financial secretary of our secret organization, and it was essential that he should keep strict accounts. The mistake he made was to use our names in his records. If such a book got into the hands of the police it would mean disaster."

"Don't talk like that," said Mortimer with a quiver from head to foot. "Glanford, such men as Norman Conquest ought not to be allowed to exist."

"We won't waste time by discussing Conquest," he said curtly. "There's not a chance in a thousand that he'll come down to this district again. We must concentrate on the job in hand. I'm convinced Glibley's record book will be found in the yacht's strong-room. It's not in the house. I've had this place torn apart, and there's no sign of it."

He broke off as voices sounded in the

hall, and both men looked around as the door burst open. It was the diver who entered, a man of foreign appearance with two other, both looking scared.

"Well?" demanded Glanford.

"Nothing, there, sir—nothing but personal diaries and things."

"What are you so scared about?" asked Glanford, rising to his feet. "Where are these personal diaries? Didn't you bring them?"

"Something happened, sir," said the man hoarsely. "While I was at work another diver came down. I recognized him. It was Norman Conquest."

"Conquest!" squeaked Mr. Mortimer in a terrified voice. "Are you sure?"

"I saw him once, sir, when Nicholas Glibley was killed," continued the diver. "Conquest appeared in another diving suit when I was coming out of the strong-room. But he's dead, sir. I rubbed him out with my blow torch."

"How do you know he's dead?" demanded Glanford, more practical.

"I turned my blow-lamp on him and burned his diving-suit," replied the man. "He got out of it, somehow, but he could never have escaped from the wreck. But the rest of the men were captured by the Coast Guard while chasing a couple of Conquest's friends."

"Neyer mind the other men," snarled Glanford, callously. "The main point is Norman Conquest has interfered once too often. We shall have to keep a lookout for his body."

NORMAN CONQUEST'S body, at that moment, was not fifteen yards away, measuring in a straight line from point to point. It was tensely arched as Norman dug a knee into the middle of somebody's back. This somebody was a guard in the hallway who carried a submachine-gun. The Gay Desperado twisted his knuckles with scientific accuracy into the fellow's carotid arteries. It was a dangerous trick, and one needed to be an expert. Norman was an expert.

The man suddenly went limp. He would remain limp for a considerable time.

"Yes, we must keep a lookout for his body," mused Glanford, in the library. "We can't have it floating about and being found by just anybody. Well, what else?" He looked at the diver. "You're

sure about the strong-room?"

The diver was sure. The strong room of the *White Corsair* contained nothing of vital importance.

"I can't say I'm surprised." Geoffrey Mortimer spoke with a superior air. He had made a rapid recovery after hearing the diver's sensational news. Glibley wouldn't have been careless enough to leave the record book there."

Glanford gave him a look.

"From a conversation I had with Glibley on the very night of his death, I am convinced that the record book is somewhere aboard," he said. "The wreck can be raised. I have already made tentative arrangements. There's nothing to prevent us having the hulk towed into Stillwater Creek, which is a small and narrow tidal channel. The country round about is bleak and desolate; scarcely a house for miles. We shall have no trouble at all and can do practically as we like. I have other ideas, too. I'll get things moving tomorrow."

Crash!

The shattering of glass came from the curtained window, and all the men in the room turned. Two of them reached for their guns. They stared as they saw the wicked muzzle of a sub-machine-gun poke its way through the curtains.

"Who is it?" yelled Glanford.

The gun spoke in answer. With a rattling roar it began to spew forth fire and lead. Every man dropped flat to the floor in instant expectation of death.

Put—put—put—put!

The machine-gun *put-putted* merrily, and after the first two or three agonized seconds, Glanford and those with him realized the stream of bullets was hissing overhead. They could hear bullets thudding against the opposite wall, high up near the ceiling.

"My heavens," croaked Glanford.

He watched, fascinated, as he surmised the truth. The bullets, digging into the plaster, were forming figures—rough, irregular figures, but easily recognizable. All about them hung a whitish fog from the shattered plaster. As abruptly as the fusillade had begun it ceased, and there on the wall was the celebrated trouble sign:

"Norman Conquest!" breathed Preston Glanford hoarsely.

CHAPTER IV

A WARRANT FOR CONQUEST



BREAKFAST was the keynote for the bright summer morning at Joy Everard's charming little home in New Rochelle, two weeks later. In the sun-bright sitting-room of the cottage Norman Conquest and she, tired and happy, were eating an astonishingly large platter of ham and eggs. The air was fragrant with the aroma of hot coffee.

It was still early in the day. Joy Everard made a dainty picture as she sat across the table, still clad in a becoming bathrobe. Conquest, fully dressed except for his coat, lounged in a chair, opposite her.

"A hectic fortnight, Pixie," he said, contentedly, as he helped himself to another egg. "Better bag this last shoulder of ham while you have the chance. How's the supply of coffee?"

"There's plenty," said Joy. "Only fourteen days? It seems to me we've been breaking into warehouses full of gas-masks every night and planting gasoline and stuff for ages. Well, I will say, Desperado, when you do a thing, you do it properly. If there's one of those gas masks left for overseas, it'll be a miracle."

"No good wasting time," replied Norman Conquest. "Those dud masks had to be wiped out of existence. Yes, it's exactly two weeks since I went for my celebrated night swim and crashed the little conference at Sea View. We've been busy ever since, Pixie, and I fancy the opposition, in its own way, has been getting a move on, too. We shall have to drop out to Hampton Bays and see. Anyway, I'll bet the big news of this morning will spoil an appetite or two."

"You think you put a kink in the racket?"

"Yes, Pixie. The whole dud five million have gone up in smoke, to say nothing of the factory which produced them." Conquest pushed back his plate and lighted a cigarette. "Brother Glanford won't dare to press for action, or even a searching inquiry. My trade-

mark will have told him all he wants to know, and a bit more."

The girl looked thoughtful.

"Leaving all those '1066' chalk marks seemed rash to me," she remarked.

"That wasn't rash, child," laughed Conquest. "Those chalk marks will merely give the police a headache."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it," admitted Joy Everard, as she strolled to the window and stood there, idly watching the chirping birds in the branches of the trees outside. Then her glance dropped to the sidewalk before the house. "Speaking of having headaches, Detective Inspector Williams, of the New York State Police, doesn't look like a man with a headache. He looks to me more like a man with a warrant."

"Williams?" repeated Norman Conquest, as he arose leisurely to his feet. "I believe I've met him, but I didn't know he was on your visiting list. Somebody must have been doing some pretty swift thinking."

"And now it's your turn," said Joy nodding.

Her composure was a perfect match for his own. She had not quivered an eyelid when she had seen the large, square figure of Detective Inspector William Williams walking placidly up the front walk to the door of the cottage. Below a bell rang loudly.

"Might as well let Williams in," said Norman Conquest, in calm tones. "Don't trouble yourself, Pixie, I'll go."

He was not in a hurry. Stepping over beside Joy, he took a quick glance up and down the road, which was in excellent view from the sitting-room window. That hasty survey told him there were no other police officers in sight. He paused at the mirror to adjust his tie and smooth his hair. Then he donned his coat, opened the sitting-room door and ran lightly down the stairs that led to the comfortable lounge-hall.

As Conquest flung open the front door and looked at the visitor inquiringly, his coolness and general appearance of good humor astonished Inspector Williams. The inspector had not expected to come face to face with this man without considerable difficulty. These two had met only once, during the Mortimer episode, but recognition was mutual.

"Mr. Norman Conquest, I think?" said the inspector politely.

"Inspector Williams, I'm certain," replied Conquest, with elaborate courtesy.

He stood aside in invitation, and Williams entered. Williams seemed placid but, as a matter of fact, inwardly he felt embarrassed. Any surprises he liked to spring himself. Norman Conquest was the last person he had expected to find on Joy Everard's doorstep. In his pocket was a John Doe warrant but he did not wish to serve it just yet. He had only come to question the girl.

"You didn't come to see me, surely?" asked Norman Conquest, as he closed the door. "Charming little place, this. It belongs to Miss Everard. Come along upstairs, Inspector. Is the young lady expecting you?"

THEY started to mount the broad steps in the hall.

"I don't know that I need to bother Miss Everard now," said the detective, halfway up. "I really came in the hope she might be able to give me your address, Mr. Conquest. Since I have run into you we might as well have a chat."

"What made you think she would know my address?"

"Need we play games?" asked Inspector Williams, gently, stopping at the top landing. "I'm not fooling you and you're not fooling me. Let's shoot square, Mr. Conquest. Some weeks ago you were interested in a certain Geoffrey Mortimer, and you had, shall we say, fun?"

"Fun," approved Norman Conquest. "The very word."

"Mortimer employed a private secretary—Miss Everard," continued Williams. "She resigned suddenly, and from certain information I picked up at the time I gathered that she and you were friendly. So when I found a reason to get in touch with you, I naturally came along to see her. Clear?"

Norman Conquest opened a door nearby.

"Crystal," he said with a smile, ushering the visitor into the living-room. The girl came toward them. "Joy, meet Inspector William Williams, of the New York State Police."

"That's unnecessary," said Joy. "I already know the inspector although we've never met formally."

"Inspector Williams spends his time

ferreting out mysterious crimes, so he's an honest-to-goodness dee-tek-a-tiff, really he is!"

"A detective!" echoed Joy, clasping her hands, starry eyed. "Isn't that nice?"

"Look here," protested Williams, his chubby face turning brick red, "this isn't a social call." He steadied himself deliberately. "Do you mind telling me what you were doing last night?"

"He was with me," said Joy.

She would have said more had not Conquest intervened.

"We were out motoring together," the Gay Desperado cut in swiftly. "All night."

"All night?" repeated the inspector. "Where did you dig up the gasoline?"

"Saved it," said Conquest, in firm tones. "We always save our gas for one big splurge."

Inspector Williams stared at him.

"Do you mind if I look at your car?" suggested the detective.

"Go ahead and look at it if you wish," grinned Conquest. "But it would be just a waste of time, when I can save you a lot of trouble. I know what you want. You'd like to find incriminating evidence when there isn't any. I never leave incriminating evidence behind me—make it a set rule. When persons start lighting fires in warehouses near the water front—"

"What?" yelled Williams, startled out of his placidity. "You admit it?"

"Burning up factories," continued Conquest, his grin broadening.

"Good heavens!" cried the detective, staring at him. "Do you realize what you are saying? Have you gone crazy?"

"Not at all," laughed Conquest. "I'm proud of my work. Of course it was a tedious job, going from place to place, during the last two weeks, but we did a lot of damage."

Inspector Williams looked at the young man with goggling eyes.

"And you admit all this to me," he said. "When I only had suspicions, too. It's incredible. I think you must be losing your mind. You confess, then, that you wilfully set fire to the Midland Equipment Corporation factory?"

"Yes, and also various warehouses, filled with gas masks and other stuff intended for soldiers now overseas," nodded Conquest. "Those boys will

thank me for it later. The stuff was all phony, passed through by means of an elaborate series of tricks. Preston Glanford and Geoffrey Mortimer are a couple of cheap crooks and traitors. They are helping Hitler. I had to move fast to prevent those supplies from being shipped off."

Williams' face turned redder.

"That's nonsense," he cried. "Glanford and Mortimer are solid citizens, trusted by the Government, doing a splendid job. You've slipped badly, Conquest. Now I'll show you a little trick of my own."

FOR a stocky man he could move fast, and now, for once in his life, Norman Conquest was caught entirely unprepared.

Williams' first act was to withdraw one hand from his pocket. Nickel-plated steel glittered in the air as he lunged over to Joy Everard and snapped a pair of handcuffs upon her wrists, linking them together. Then he took three strides to the window, whipped out a police whistle and blew several loud blasts upon it. So quickly were these things done that the smiling Norman Conquest had no time to stop him.

"A pity about that," said the Gay Desperado in sorrowful tones.

Then with a move even more abrupt than that of the detective he jumped forward, intending to pull him away from the window. But it seems Williams had been waiting for just that, also. He whirled and jammed a blued Police Positive in Conquest's middle.

"Don't move," he warned the younger man.

At this moment Joy Everard took a hand in the game. Inspector Williams had centered his attention on Conquest and it turned out to be a grave mistake.

"Drop the gun, Inspector," called out the girl. "If you don't I'll have to shoot, and I wouldn't like to do that because you're a nice man."

Williams stared over his shoulder in surprise. From somewhere Joy Everard had produced an automatic and held the muzzle lined on his broad back.

The huge revolver of the detective thudded to the carpet at once. Williams obeyed instantly. Something told him if he did not obey, the girl would do exactly as she had said.

Norman Conquest thrust out a lean brown hand and snatched the police whistle from the inspector's fingers. Then he seized the detective and thrust him toward the girl.

"Nice going, Pixie," grinned the Gay Desperado. "You handle him. Sorry about that warrant you have in your pocket, Inspector—oh, yes, I know you have one—because you won't get a chance to serve it."

"You'll be sorry for this," stormed the detective.

"Forget it," advised Joy Everard, balancing the weapon in her hand; her wrists were still linked together. "Do me a favor, will you Mr. Williams? Unlock these handcuffs. As jewelry they're nothing much to wear around the house."

Again Williams noted the glint in her eye. He had intended to say he had no key, but he changed his mind. From the pocket of his vest he took a tiny key and advancing cautiously, opened the steel rings around her wrists. Then as Conquest pulled the arms of the astonished policeman behind his back, she put the handcuffs upon Williams and snapped them shut.

"There," she said. "That does it."

She ran across the room and opened the closet door. Conquest's quick mind weighed the possibilities of the plan she thus suggested and approved it.

"An excellent idea," he laughed. "In you go, Inspector."

Shoving the handcuffed Williams before him, he thrust him into the improvised prison and slammed the door. It was a good strong door with a hefty lock. He turned the key. There was no window in the cupboard, not even a ventilator, but plenty of air would seep in through cracks. Inside, Inspector Williams began shouting with fury and kicking thunderously on the inner panels. Norman Conquest dropped the key of the handcuffs on the carpet in plain sight, where it could be easily found by persons entering the room.

"Get dressed, quick," he said to the girl. "You have only one minute. Doff the bathrobe, throw on what you can, and carry the rest with you. The main thing is a coat to cover you up. Then we're off. We're leaving in a hurry, one jump ahead of them, as usual."

Conquest snatched up his hat and

walked over to close the window. The uproar which Mr. Williams was creating might not be heard for some time. All Norman Conquest needed was the minutes he had suggested. Then he and Joy ran lightly down the steps and emerged into the sunshine. From somewhere close at hand came the sound of a police whistle.

"Oh, well," said Conquest with a grin.

He blew a couple of shrill blasts on the inspector's whistle and sprinted down the drive toward the road. Two hot and breathless State policemen came running up, one in either direction, arriving about the same second.

"Didn't you see him," said Norman Conquest, in an excited voice.

"See who?" panted one of the policemen. "What happened?"

"This young lady's car," said Conquest. "Some thief jumped into it, as it was standing on the drive here, and drove off with it. Didn't you see a red runabout flash past?"

"It went that way," said Joy, pointing in a direction different from which either of the policemen had come.

By this time various windows had opened on both sides of the road, and an assortment of heads were on view. The two policemen, after a hasty consultation, hurried off down the road.

"That was easy," murmured Norman Conquest with a chuckle.

"I suppose you know they'll be back in a minute?" asked Joy calmly. "They'll hear Inspector Williams and make trouble."

"But by then we shall be gone," explained Norman Conquest. "Hurry up."

It took him about forty-three seconds to open the garage, start up his powerful roadster, and drive off with a roar that sounded not unlike a gale of laughter.

CHAPTER V

THE PLOTTERS BECOME ALARMED



JOY EVERARD, in spite of her knowledge of Norman Conquest's snappy methods, was rather breathless.

"Now what?" she asked, as Conquest sent the great super-speed car streaking out of the district. "I don't want to strike a critical note, Desperado, but I suppose you realize that

from now on there'll be about an army of State policemen watching my home?"

"That's only half of it," replied Norman Conquest, his eyes dancing. "As soon as those two cops get back to make inquiries, they'll hear Inspector Williams' 'Prisoner's Song,' break in, and search the place. By the time they've finished it'll look as though a herd of buffalo had charged through it. It's a pity."

"You really think it's a pity?"

"I do."

"I was just wondering," mused Joy. She was silent for a moment, thinking. "Why did you admit to Inspector Williams that we were responsible for those fires? As he said, it seemed a rather needless and silly thing to do. Now you've put all the police on our trail, restricted our movements, and made our task ten times more difficult. Every policeman in the country will be keeping an eye to spot us."

"Because, my dear girl, they were already on the look out for us," answered Norman Conquest easily. "Don't fall for what Williams said; his call was not just by chance. Perhaps he didn't have a warrant, but he would have ended up by taking us in for questioning. And my object was to remain free untrammelled, so I merely beat him to the punch."

"I see," said the girl, "You preferred to get the jump on him, rather than let him take the initiative."

"Exactly," said Conquest.

"Now where do we go?" asked Joy. "Which way do we head?"

"Out to Hampton Bays," said Conquest, increasing the speed of the car. "We'll drop in and pay a visit to our friends Glanford and Mortimer and see how they are progressing with their various little plots. I heard them mention something about Stillwater Creek when I touched them up with a machine-gun about two weeks ago. Yesterday, I glanced through an atlas. Stillwater Creek cuts into some property owned by Glanford, near Sea View, at Hampton Bays. It's fenced off and is on private property. It's one of the many fairly navigable inlets in that vicinity."

"Why are you interested?" asked the girl, as Conquest made a turn and then tramped down hard on the power pedal,

"A friend of mine told me, several days ago, that an ancient sea-going barge ran aground there, at the mouth of Stillwater Creek, blocking it completely. I'm just curious, Pixie, to find out what friends Glanford and Mortimer are up to."

"How are you going to get there?" inquired the girl. "The police may be watching the bridges already, you know, Desperado."

"By way of the ferry from Bridgeport to Port Jefferson," answered Norman Conquest. "As for the police, they don't worry me yet. We're a little too early for them to get organized for a general alarm. However, this route is more direct and I believe we can give them the slip in fine style."

Then he stepped up the speed of the car and all conversation ceased for a time. Several hours later they were spinning down a side road on Long Island toward the South Shore. The Gay Desperado had given Joy Everard detailed instructions and their plans had been carefully laid.

FINALLY they came into rough hilly country which was grown with thick brush and brambles. Occasionally the country opened up a little and they caught glimpses of water sparkling in the sunlight.

"Getting there," Conquest told the girl. "Let me see where we are."

He stopped at the next crossroad and inspected the signs nailed up on a post. Joy Everard watched him with sparkling eyes.

"Do you know where we are, Desperado?" she laughed, "or had we better ask a cop?" Norman Conquest grinned.

"Not necessary, Pixie, but don't think I'd hesitate a minute." He lifted an arm and pointed in a direction slightly to the right of the wheel. "A friend of mine owns a place called Golder's Green, but he isn't using it now. That's where I'm taking you."

Golder's Green was a narrow, old-fashioned place, with high walls on either side and, at the bottom end, double doors, evidently leading into a garage. The space widened out at the end. Joy Everard saw there were two sets of doors side by side. Stopping the car, Norman Conquest opened the garage doors. The girl drove the car in,

while Conquest closed the doors again. "Why wasn't I told about this?" asked Joy.

He grinned and bolted the doors on the inside. They were special bolts, self-locking and fitting into extra long steel sockets. Joy was looking around. No window could be seen, all light being admitted through a small steel grille high up in one of the doors. Yet the light was sufficient for her to see there was no other exit.

"This way," said Norman Conquest.

His eyes twinkled as he reached high up on one of the side walls and pressed against a wooden ledge. The wall was really a solid-looking brick one, and Joy, prepared as she was for surprises, stared in wonder as a narrow opening appeared in the wall.

"Not a bad fake, eh?" asked Norman Conquest, with pride. "It's really a wooden partition, a heavy one of thick oak. The 'bricks' are just slices stuck on. Looks solid, and feels solid. I've been busy on the place, on and off, for a month or two. Go on through."

"It resembles the den of the Secret Six."

JOY'S attractive face was alight with interest as she slipped through the narrow opening and found herself in a narrow adjoining room. Apparently, there were no doors or windows. Light was admitted through slitlike gratings, high up in the walls. She heard a little thud behind her, and turning, saw that the door was closed. But on this side there had been no attempt to conceal it. It was clearly a door.

"What is this, a cellar?" inquired the girl.

"No, the true back of the garage," answered Conquest. "This room doesn't show, and no one would ever suspect it unless actual measurements were made."

He stepped over, thrust his hand in a hole and pulled a lever. There was a grating sound as one of the flagstones moved upward on hinges. A passage was disclosed with a flight of steps descending out of sight.

"Get down there, young lady, quick."

Joy Everard offered no objection. She felt curious. She went down the steps and came out into a small house, evidently near the water, for she could

the sweat-greasy slope of his nose, and he had all the appearance of a bearer of sticky tidings. Old Man Bad News himself. Arriving at Glanford's side he could do nothing for a moment or two but gibber. Then he managed to pull a folded newspaper out of his pocket.

"Read that," he gasped throatily.

With tight lips, Glanford looked at the newspaper. The headline, stretched right across the page in two-inch letters:

FACTORY FIRES LAID TO SABOTAGE

Then he read a smaller headline and his fingers tightened on the newspaper:

POLICE HUNT FOR NORMAN CONQUEST

"Well?" croaked Mortimer, clutching his arm. "You see what's happened, don't you? Didn't I warn you? That young outlaw is responsible for all our losses."

"It's bad," said Glanford evenly.

"Bad? You stand there and call it bad?" almost shrieked the other. "Are you crazy, Glanford? You understand what this means, don't you? Those chalk marks, '1066.' Conquest again. There's no stopping the young demon. Glanford, he'll come here next. The only reason he hasn't been here before is because he was too busy with your phony gas masks."

"Pull yourself together, Mortimer," said Glanford contemptuously. "If Conquest comes here it'll be the last thing he'll ever do. I just hope he tries it."

PRESTON GLANFORD walked away. He was in no mood to listen to Mortimer's panic-stricken ravings. The news he had read in the paper left him as cold and ruthless as bared steel. Neither was he particularly surprised. For the last week he had suspected the truth. In spite of his brave words to Geoffrey Mortimer, it was impossible for Preston Glanford to deny, strictly to himself, that the name of Norman Conquest gave him a chill of foreboding. But there was strength and determination in this stocky financier. Not for nothing was he Number One of the organizations which had brought him wealth from nefarious enterprises, all without once actually falling afoul of the law.

Emerging from the woodland path, he found his big limousine where he had left it, parked in the private road which meandered through the woods for about half a mile. His chauffeur drove him along this twisting, narrow by-line until, quite suddenly, he came upon a sleepy village, nearby. It was quite a large village, and the inhabitants called it a town. It boasted of a solid block of stores, a weekly newspaper and a rotary club. The village green, on all sides, appeared to be flanked by inns and taverns.

On the southern aspect of the green, however, there was room between two buildings for a wedge-shaped police station. Preston Glanford stopped there, plodded up the steps, and walked into the office of Chief of Police Isaiah Muggs.

Taken by surprise, the chief hastily smuggled the *Daily Racing Form* into a drawer and fastened his collar. He rose awkwardly to his feet and saluted, for he was a man who harbored a proper awe for wealth and position. Moreover, Preston Glanford was a local justice of the peace, and a big-shot generally.

"Sorry to walk in upon you like this, Muggs," said Glanford, brusquely. "Something important, most important."

Chief Muggs, a sturdy, square, well-fed man with bobbling chin-whiskers and a head as bald as the polished bars he liked to patronize, indicated a chair and invited his distinguished visitor to be seated.

Glanford refused the chair. He leaned over the desk, and planked the newspaper on Muggs' blotting-pad.

"Seen this?" he asked curtly. "The factory that has been burned down was mine, and I've brought you this paper because it discloses who the saboteur is."

"It does, sir?" ejaculated Mr. Muggs, with a jump. "I haven't seen this paper before. Saboteurs are lawbreakers, sir, and all lawbreakers should be put in prison."

"Of course," snapped Glanford impatiently. "You'll notice the man's name is Norman Conquest and I've reason to believe he is coming here. It's quite likely he'll attempt to blow up the yacht I've got in Stillwater Creek."

"I've heard about that yacht, Mr.

smell the sea. Yet the door was closed and the windows carefully shuttered. The place was comfortably furnished and there appeared to be several rooms, even a bathroom. Through another doorway she caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a kitchen.

"What is this, Desperado?" demanded the girl. "I don't understand."

Norman Conquest placed himself in an easy chair and lighted a cigarette.

"It used to be an old deserted fishing club, but I fixed it up as a hideout," he explained. "Outside it still appears dilapidated and abandoned, but that's only the outward appearance. My friend helped me work at it. It's protected by swamps and the roughest kind of country, hard to get at, except by the way we came. That's why we selected it."

Joy Everard's face lighted up with delight.

"Then we're going to live here while you are working on the case of Glanford and Mortimer?" she said.

"Exactly. But I wanted you to have a look at it first. Snoop around a little and tell me what you think."

Later the girl returned, bubbling with enthusiasm.

"For a hideout you haven't forgotten anything," she reported. "It's positively luxurious."

Norman Conquest rose to his feet and started toward an inside room.

"Good," he said. "Wait a minute, Pixie. I intend to don a disguise. Then we're going places. And when we get through with Glanford and Mortimer, I don't think they'll feel glad we came."

Within the deep recesses of the narrow tidal inlet known as Stillwater Creek, there was much activity.

The waterway had been roughly but efficiently dammed, and a species of crude dry dock improvised. Resting in the mud of this drained section of the creek was the once beautiful *White Corsair*. Round and about her, over her, inside her, swarmed a gang of Italian laborers. Big motor-operated cranes were firmly planted on the solid ground of the banks, just clear of the pressing woods, and these clanked and clattered and roared unceasingly.

The *White Corsair* had taken on a certain drunken, raffish look as she squatted in her last resting-place. She was leaning slightly to starboard, as

though weary of the whole business, and not a little indignant at the indecent way in which she was being methodically stripped of her finery.

But Preston Glanford, as he stood on the bank of the creek, watching operations, looked one hundred per cent sober. He had every reason to look sober. All this work was costing thousands, and so far he had drawn blank. The yacht was being demolished plate by plate and plank by plank. Special men remained constantly on watch as the Italians, who spoke no English, toiled and sweated. Since early morning Glanford had been present, and he was reluctant to depart. The vital importance of the hunt kept him glued to the place so that he would know instantly when success was achieved.

HE WAS becoming nervous and jumpy. He trusted nobody, not even the foremen who were superintending the operations. True, the laborers knew no English, their complete ignorance of the language had been Qualification No. 1 when they were being engaged, and they had not the faintest idea why the yacht was being broken up. All the same, Preston Glanford felt an urge to remain on the scene, watching everybody and everything in general.

"Well, Lenaro?" he demanded sharply, as one of his more trusted men—lately in the employ of the deceased Glibley—came over the improvised gangway from the yacht's deck.

"Aw, shucks, Boss, why don't you scram?" said the other. "It's no good you sticking around. We've hardly started. Maybe it'll take weeks."

"There's going to be trouble for you and everybody else if the job isn't done inside three days," interrupted Glanford. "Time is of vital importance. I want to get the whole thing over before the countryside can start blinking."

Lenaro shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Sounds like a pig suffocating in a pool of motor oil caused Glanford to turn around. He was in time to see the fat, flabby figure of Geoffrey Mortimer come reeling out of the woodland pathway which was the only route to the nearest road. Mortimer looked a mess. He was hatless, his spectacles had skidded down

Glanford," said Chief Muggs reproachfully. "The town is talking, furriners, and all that. If you wasn't Preston Glanford, you'd get a petition of protest from the council."

"Nonsense," cut in Glanford. "Don't you people know I'm doing war work for the government?" His manner suddenly changed. It became confidential and intimate, a fact immensely flattering to Chief Muggs. "The *White Corsair* is being dismantled piece by piece with the utmost secrecy. You may not know, Muggs, that I am closely connected with the government's Intelligence Department."

Glanford paused, looked at the police chief, and wondered if it would be any good talking of intelligence.

"We have reason to suspect that a foreign spy secreted some plans on poor Nicholas Gibley's yacht," the financier said. "They must be found at any cost, and the fact that non-English-speaking Italians are employed should convince you of the serious nature of the situation. They're going to send down a G-man from Washington but I'd like to beat them to it. You are an intelligent man, Muggs, and this tip should be sufficient."

GLANFORD had touched the right note. Chief Muggs was impressed.

"Now you know why Norman Conquest may try to sabotage the yacht. I want protection, Muggs, all the protection you can dig up."

The chief pulled his chin whiskers.

"This ain't a big police station," he said dubiously. "Four men is the most I can manage. Maybe you'd best let me get the State Police."

"No, no," interrupted Glanford. "That's not necessary. I don't want too much publicity. I can trust you, Muggs, to cooperate with me in strict confidence. This Norman Conquest is not likely to try anything during the daytime; he is essentially a night worker. I want your men on duty around my property the instant it's dark. If you apprehend him, I'll see you are rewarded handsomely." Then his eyes narrowed and his voice rang like tempered steel. "And if you kill him I'll make you rich!"

Thereupon Preston Glanford departed.

CHAPTER VI

SPECIAL GOVERNMENT AGENT



PRESTON GLANFORD was so intent upon his own affairs as he left the police station he did not see a dusty, travel-stained roadster standing outside The Harvester House, a picturesque, half-timbered inn on the other side of the parched, sun-drenched green. A hawk-faced man sat at the wheel, with a cheerful-looking dark-haired girl beside him.

Even if Preston Glanford had taken the time to scrutinize them, it is doubtful he would have recognized either of the two occupants of the car. Norman Conquest was an expert at disguises and he had taken particular pains with these.

His eyebrows were dark and bushy, his skin had been darkened to a deep olive tint and his handsome features had acquired an angular, hawkish cast. He wore a wide-brimmed black slouch hat, a high-winged collar and a long black coat with trousers to match. The make-up gave him an appearance of a man about fifty years old.

So far as Joy was concerned, the black wig changed her completely. Her own mother could have met her face to face without a glimmer of recognition.

Norman Conquest noticed the financier-promoter leave the police station and spoke to his companion.

"The Glanford affliction in person," said Conquest. "We have arrived at an opportune time."

"Yes, Daddy," answered Joy Everard, with a ripple of laughter.

Conquest swung around to look at her with a frown.

"Aren't you laying on that 'Daddy' stuff kind of heavy?" he asked. "Do you need to rub it in quite so hard?"

"But I can't help it, Daddy," grinned Joy. "You told me to call you Daddy, and that's what I'm doing, ain't I, Daddy?"

Conquest scowled. Then he laughed.

"All right," he said. "Have it your own way. Joy, what was Glanford doing in the police station?"

"I think we can guess the nature of his visit," she said. "Glanford has been telling the police all about a dangerous

wretch named Conquest. Glanford likes to be within the law, and I'll bet he's been fooling the cops up to their eyebrows."

"I'm all for doing likewise," said Conquest, his eyes glinting wickedly. "A good idea, my bright young darter. We'll push it along."

Leaving Joy in the comfortable sitting-room of The Harvester House, Norman Conquest took long, purposeful strides across the green and entered the police station. One swift, comprehensive look at Police Chief Muggs told him all he wanted to know.

Chief Muggs opened his mouth to ask the nature of the visitor's business. He paused as he found an eagle eye fixed on him.

"Your name?" demanded Norman Conquest.

"Isaiah Muggs, sir, Chief of Police."

"Move over, Muggs; I'm going to use this office as my headquarters," announced Norman Conquest. "Not much of a place, but it'll have to do. There's some other room you can use, I suppose? I must have privacy—"

"Dad bust it! You've got a nerve, trying to push in here and—"

"Don't argue, man, we haven't time for it," interrupted Conquest brusquely. "Is this the best chair you have?"

CONQUEST walked past Muggs and sat in the chief's chair. "I suppose the fellows in Washington didn't give you much notice of my coming? I'm not surprised, as the whole thing has been kept as secret as possible."

"You're darn tooting it's been kept secret," cried Muggs, not daring to protest too hard until he knew more of the visitor. "I don't know who you are or anything about it. I've had no notice at all."

"No notice?" said Conquest pretending annoyance. "By heavens, Muggs, you must be surprised at me taking possession of your office like this." He produced a wallet. "My card, which will explain everything."

It was a wide statement. The card impressed Chief Muggs. Nevertheless he believed a little more light on the subject would not come amiss. "Captain Charles Anstruther, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D. C.," said the card, and left it at that.

"My official star," continued Norman Conquest, flashing an impressive-looking gold badge. "You understand, of course? Government Service. I'm not at liberty to explain the nature of my mission in this desolate neck of the woods."

Muggs remembered what Glanford had said and thought he saw a light.

"That's right. Mr. Glanford mentioned a G-man. He told me the situation."

"Told you what?"

"About this here secret mission."

"Really? You interest me," said Conquest kindly. "Can it be possible Glanford has been indiscreet enough to talk?"

He had not the faintest idea what Muggs was driving at, but he felt any information would be useful. The "secret mission" was an invention of his own, and he felt surprised, therefore, to learn Glanford had been confiding in Chief Muggs. It was one time Glanford had overreached himself in telling one lie too many.

"Glanford wasn't indiscreet, sir," said Muggs. "Not him. No, he was telling me about that matter of the spy."

"Ah, yes, the spy."

"And how important it is to find the plans the spy hid on the yacht," continued the chief. "He also warned me to watch out for a feller by the name of Norman Conquest and to be careful he didn't try any tricks."

Norman Conquest was pleased with the way things were going. Secretly he admired Glanford's technique. It had been a brainy scheme to bluff poor old Muggs with that yarn about a spy. It afforded good cover for the strange operations which were in progress in Stillwater Creek.

"So long as I'm here, in charge, you needn't worry about Norman Conquest," said Norman Conquest, sitting forward in his chair and arranging the chief's pens, ink-pots, and blotting-pad to his own liking. "I have an idea, Muggs, that we're going to work well together. It's not my way to boast, but I trust you appreciate the honor I am bestowing on you. The last man who co-operated with me was called down to the White House and given a medal by the President himself. You'd like a medal, too, wouldn't you?"

"A medal? Gosh, yes!"

"Good. Then you know just how to earn it."

Conquest paused and frowned. The telephone was ringing. He picked up the instrument and found that Headquarters of the State Police was calling Muggs and passed over the telephone. The chief of police listened for a moment or two, jumped perceptibly, and as he continued to listen he fixed on Norman Conquest a look of awe and respect that intrigued the Gay Desperado not a little.

"A general police warning, sir," Muggs explained after he had hung up. "Every district has been instructed to watch out for a young man named Conquest. They request us to keep on the alert in this neighborhood."

NORMAN CONQUEST tut-tutted irritably.

"I'll have something to say to the State Police about this," he snapped. "My department sends me down here with the utmost secrecy, and before I can turn around the air is full of telephone calls. Well, we shall have to make the best of it, Muggs, and I'll bet you a year's salary that you'll come nearer to Norman Conquest than any other man in the Force!"

"Very kind of you to say so, sir."

"Not at all. Just a hunch."

Norman Conquest waved a busy hand, pulled his chair up to the desk, and Inspector Muggs drifted out of the office and closed the door—presumably to take up temporary quarters elsewhere. He heard nothing of the Gay Desperado's joyous laughter which, under the circumstances was almost noiseless.

At the precise moment when this conversation was taking place, an important conference concerning Norman Conquest was being held at a certain airport on Long Island. Colonel Michael Robertson, Superintendent of the New York State Police, had flown there especially to talk things over with Detective Inspector William Williams.

"No use arguing about it," snapped Robertson, "we must manage to arrest this fellow Conquest. His record shows he was mixed up in some way with the death of the late Nicholas Glibley, and the mystery of Glibley's demise on the yacht *White Corsair* has never been solved."

"Yes, I know that," said Inspector Williams. "Also I learned more about the business connections of Glibley, Glanford and Mortimer, and now it develops they weren't scrupulous about how they made money. Mortimer and Glibley have always been shady characters, and even Preston Glanford didn't have a good record until he got into this big government post. Of late, I've been hearing queer rumors about the equipment he's been furnishing our soldiers. I don't like that."

"Neither do I," retorted Robertson. "But just the same burning down warehouses and factories is a serious crime. Conquest admitted to you he was responsible. We must pick him up. Have you any idea where he might be hiding?"

"Somewhere in the eastern part of Long Island," said Williams. "We traced him to Port Jefferson, and then south a ways. Then the trail vanished. No news since then."

"Well, get busy," growled Robertson. "Take plenty of men and get out on it. You've sent out a general alarm. Now back it up. Glanford is doing something with the *White Corsair*. You might take a run out to Stillwell Creek, talk with Glanford and see what he knows. That's all."

"On the jump, sir," answered Inspector Williams. He saluted and withdrew.

Several hours later, in the evening of the same day, Norman Conquest and Joy Everard were finishing dinner in a private room of The Harvester House.

"The best thing you can do, darling daughter, is to stay here," said Norman Conquest as he relaxed in his chair and lighted a welcome smoke. "You'll be safe and snug, and there's not much chance of things popping just yet. Besides, we must study appearances. A kid of your age shouldn't wander around after dark."

"And while I'm here what are you supposed to be doing?" asked Joy suspiciously.

"Nothing much. Just a bit of scouting."

"You wouldn't fool a girl?"

THE Gay Desperado smiled.

"My dear young lady, you don't imagine there'll be any fireworks tonight, do you?" asked Norman Conquest.

patiently. "If it'll give you any satisfaction, I'll make promises. I won't play games with the trustful chief of police, and I won't attempt to get within neck-wringing distance of Brother Glanford or Uncle Mortimer. All I propose to do is a little quiet prowling in the vicinity of Stillwater Creek. Just a general look-see to get the lay of the land for future use. Satisfied?"

"So long as you're not planning to leave me out of things, I'm satisfied," said Joy Everard. "But you needn't think you can leave me tucked away in an old musty inn when the whistle goes for the big kick-off." She stretched herself luxuriously. "All right then. Run along and do your snooping."

Ten minutes later Joy Everard watched from the window and saw Norman Conquest's athletic figure as it strode across the green in the direction of the police station. She saw him pass under the light which hung over the door.

Chief of Police Muggs was still on duty. He had not had such a late night since the firehouse had burned down five years ago.

He had taken possession of his own office once more, and was nodding in his chair when Norman Conquest looked in.

"What's the idea, friend?" inquired Conquest. "Don't you rural cops ever go to bed?"

"I am sleepy, and that's a fact," admitted the chief guiltily. "Afraid there won't be much sleep for me tonight, not until daylight, leastaways. All my men are out guarding Preston Glanford's property, just in case that Conquest fellow shows up. So I must stay here on duty in case anything happens."

"You have my sympathy, Isaiah," said Norman Conquest. "I've come to see you about those same bloodhounds of yours. Guarding Glanford's property, are they? Well, I do some secret investigation of my own, and I don't want one of your men jumping on my head and beating me up. So get busy and write me out a pass."

"You mean a sort of written authority, sir, signed by me?"

"How well you put things in a nutshell!"

Norman Conquest had a look of hawk-eyed authority. So piercing was

his gaze, so penetrating, that Chief Muggs twice spilled the ink as he was writing out the pass. Inwardly the Desperado bubbled with silent laughter. His keen sense of humor enabled him to appreciate the ripe juiciness of the situation.

He appreciated it even more, some little time later, when he solemnly presented his pass to a stolid policeman who was keeping a sharp lookout for Norman Conquest. This policeman saluted Norman Conquest, with great respect, and permitted him to enter the enclosed woods which belonged to Preston Glanford.

"Everything quiet?" inquired Norman Conquest before leaving.

"Yes, sir."

"Glanford about anywhere?"

"I think he left for New York, sir, with the gent who's staying with him," replied the constable. "That big gentleman, Mr. Mortimer, sir."

"Well, don't worry about me. We Government men do most of our work at night," said Norman Conquest.

Norman Conquest's flippancy dropped from him like a cloak as he penetrated more deeply along the woodland path. He was fully aware of the dangers that lurked. Glanford and Mortimer were half expecting him, and the immediate region of Stillwater Creek, he felt, was not half so peaceful and tranquil as it seemed.

WORK on the yacht, he knew, was completely suspended during the comparatively short hours of the summer night. There were no facilities for artificial lighting on a big scale, and even Italians must sleep occasionally. Incidentally, this was not the first time Norman Conquest had penetrated to the scene of operations by night. So far as he had been able to ascertain, not even a guard was kept. The laborers, with the coming of dusk, went off in a body to a tent camp some two miles away, beyond the woods.

All the same, Norman Conquest left the trodden path soon after he had bade good night to the policeman, and he vanished into the woods as silently and as mysteriously as a night shadow. He possessed an uncanny faculty for turning himself into an integral part of the surroundings.

He had not lied to Joy Everard. This present jaunt was truly a scouting expedition.

He wanted to give the wreck a once-over, and see how far the work of demolition had progressed. But this did not prevent him from moving through the woods with the stealth of a stalking fox.

He came out of the undergrowth near the crude drydock. In front of him loomed the little enclosed engine-house of one of the cranes, and the crane arm, spidery and looking like something out of the future, reared against the starry sky.

An owl was hooting somewhere on no light, no movement.

NORMAN CONQUEST began to think, with reason, that his precautions were unnecessary.

Any chance he had to take he must take now.

There was no moon, but the stars were giving out their best, and the summer night was of that ethereal luminosity which permits one to see with a fair amount of distinctness. Between the line of trees which bordered the bank of the creek, and the deck of the *White Corsair*, there was no cover of any kind.

But, risk or no risk, Norman Conquest was determined to go aboard.

Quite calmly he broke cover and walked to the gangway. He was ready to drop flat and fire his gun as he was dropping, but no bullets came hissing out of the surrounding darkness. He reached the deck unchallenged, and even when a piece of loose metal clanked there was still no sign.

"Well, well, well," murmured Norman Conquest softly.

So neither of the two partners had held no real expectation that he would come tonight. On the whole, it was a good sign.

If this meant anything at all, it meant the search was unsuccessful, and so far, there was not any immediate prospect of the job being finished. What other reason could there be for this silence?

Unless—

Norman Conquest's heart seemed to stand still. Unless he had arrived too late!

CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT IN A TRAP



IN AN attitude of rigid consternation, Norman Conquest stood still in the center of the clearing, staring at the ruined remains of the yacht. He realized fully the extent of the disaster which threatened him. It meant that all of his plans and careful preparations had been a failure. It meant, from now on, he would be a fugitive, not only from the police, but from the Government of the United States. His sacrifices had been in vain.

Preston Glanford and Geoffrey Mortimer would have triumphed.

The lives of thousands of American soldiers might be the penalty. Hitler and the Axis Powers would profit. He would be outlawed by his own country as well as the American nation. A traitor and a turncoat!

But only for a moment was Norman Conquest dismayed. Then he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Bah!" he said aloud.

Conquest decided to take nothing for granted. He was not a man to give up so easily. If Preston Glanford had found Nicholas Gibley's record book and destroyed it, there would be other ways to force a confession. He would take nothing for granted.

Norman Conquest carried on as he had originally planned. The *White Corsair's* deserted condition proved nothing, after all. He had half expected to find her deserted.

His keen eyes had now become so accustomed to the starlight he could see the whole expanse of the littered hulk with satisfactory clarity. No trace remained of the proud yacht's once streamlined beauty. Her graceful superstructure had gone completely. Every vestige of it had been stripped away. All the upper cabins had disappeared, too, and nothing remained of the salon but a shell.

Picking his way through the litter of debris, Norman Conquest passed into the husk of the beautifully-paneled stateroom which had once been Nicholas Gibley's private sanctum. The roof was open to the air, and even the walls were riddled. It was in this place Norman

Conquest had encountered the flame-throwing diver, and it was difficult for him to realize that he had had a life and death struggle under water on this very spot.

He found a black, gaping pit farther along that proved to be the top of one of the staircases. All the stairs were intact, and after he had picked his way down them he found himself in utter blackness. A powerful electric torch helped matters. The beam flashed along a paneled corridor like a young searchlight. The paneling had lost all its beauty. It was coated with a film of mud and mildew and in many places the rich veneer was peeling off, revealing the metal behind. Cabins opened out on both sides, and these, like the corridor, were pictures of dank and depressing ruination.

Only now did Norman Conquest realize the colossal nature of the task Glanford had been compelled to perform. Tearing the *White Corsair* to pieces deck by deck, and cabin by cabin, was a tough job. This was particularly apparent when Conquest examined the steel-work behind the peeling veneer. Each cabin was like a steel trap; and he discovered, too, that thick sound-proofing material had been built into the walls inside the rooms. The Gay Desperado's jaw tightened as full realization came to him.

These cabins, with their tiny port-holes, were on the starboard side of the deck; there were similar cabins on the port side. Below these, no doubt, there was another deck complete with its own staterooms. Not all of them were beautifully disguised prisons, perhaps, but there were plenty. This deck alone, no doubt, contained the sound-proof prisons in which helpless exiled Norwegian officials, lured there by various tricks, had been carried across the Atlantic and turned over to Nazi U-boats for a life of hideous slavery and torture.

NORMAN CONQUEST'S lips were set in a thin line as he emerged from one of the staterooms. But for his activities, many other victims would have occupied these sumptuous cells. His thoughts stopped dead like the switching-off of a light.

The faintest whispering sound of a scraping foot had impinged itself on his

super-sensitive ears. As he swung the beam of his torchlight around, his gun leaped into his fist, and his supple fingers curled around the trigger.

"Come right in, customers," he called out. "And if either of you want your body ventilated, just say the word. This ventilator of mine is guaranteed to give perfect results."

Preston Glanford and Geoffrey Mortimer were caught in the full glare of the beam. With such lightninglike rapidity had the Gay Desperado acted neither man had had a chance to raise his own hand, although each carried a gun. In his excitement he had forgotten his disguise and spoken in his natural voice.

Both of the other men gave a start of surprise as they recognized him.

"Why, it's Conquest!" said Glanford. "Listen, Conquest, we don't want to start any shooting match. You were too quick for us. We'll drop our guns."

Glanford tossed his weapon to the floor. Mortimer's automatic had already slipped out of his pudgy, nerveless fingers.

"I had been about to suggest the same thing," said Norman Conquest, his senses on the alert for the explanation of this tame submission. "But where's the catch, Brother?"

"Catch? There's no catch," replied the promoter, spreading out his hands. "How can there be a catch, Conquest? You had that light on us before we knew you were here. For the moment you win. Can't we talk this over?"

"So some of your guards can creep up behind me and do their stuff?" said Norman Conquest. "You see, I don't trust you. If we're going to talk, Slug, we'll talk in the open."

"Of course, anything you wish," agreed Glanford readily, too readily. "Mortimer, keep your hands up and walk backward to the staircase. I'll do the same."

"This is really beautiful," jibed Conquest.

Instinct told him Glanford had something tricky up his sleeve, and for the life of him Norman Conquest could not figure what it could be. With faces haggard with fear, the two men were backing down the corridor, their hands held high, away from all possible reserve weapons.

Just the same, the psychology of the thing struck Conquest as all wrong. Dead wrong. A man like Glanford had nerve, courage. He would never knuckle like this. Somewhere, then, Glanford was working a swindle, a catch. More than ever Norman Conquest brought every faculty to bear on the situation. He followed the two men slowly, cautiously, walking crab-wise, so that he could plant his back against one of the steel walls at a split-second notice.

The corridor in the opposite direction was black and empty, and the possibility of help from unseen underlings seemed remote, and could be ruled out. It flashed into Norman Conquest's mind that there was a ready explanation of Glanford's presence at this awkward hour. He had been going to New York. On the way he had telephoned the police station. Muggs had told him about Captain Anstruther, and Glanford had put two and two together.

"Well, none of us is perfect," thought Norman Conquest. "The place I slipped was in forgetting about the telephone and in confiding my plans to Muggs."

Thud!

IN SPITE of his intensified vigilance, the catch had materialized.

He saw Preston Glanford's upraised left hand brush against the molding at the top of the corridor panels. Simultaneously came a clanging, metallic thud immediately behind Norman Conquest. With one lightning jump Conquest slammed his back to the side wall and half-glanced around. There was no longer any depth of corridor. A rust-streaked barrier of steel, extending from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, had cut it in half.

"Clever," said Norman Conquest, "but dangerous. You mustn't do that again, Glanford."

He twitched his gun a point upward and pulled the trigger. Preston Glanford screamed as the bullet took off the top of a finger. Yet he had courage. He did not hesitate. His other hand darted out and once more he pressed the button. As he did so, Norman Conquest saw another steel gate drop down from the ceiling and bounce on the floor, cutting him off on that side, also.

Clang!

The hull of the ship shook with the

jolt. The trap was complete. On two sides the corridor had been shut off, and Norman Conquest was hemmed between the steel barriers. True enough, there yet remained a doorway leading into an inside cabin, but the sole opening there was a tiny porthole, scarcely large enough to allow the escape of a terrier, let alone a husky man.

Through the partition he heard faint voices, astonishingly clear-cut and unmuffled, but only just audible.

"Quit being a spineless jellyfish," came the voice of Preston Glanford. Evidently he was speaking to Geoffrey Mortimer. "We've got the young demon, I tell you. Stop it, Mortimer, don't faint at the sight of blood. Help me to bandage this hand."

Norman Conquest smiled. Those few words revealed the characters of the two men. Glanford, half his finger gone, bleeding and in dire agony, remained strong and commanding. Geoffrey Mortimer, uninjured, had flinched at the crisis, and now seemed on the point of fainting.

But Norman Conquest wasted no further time in studying their characters. He was too busy reproaching himself. He had known the *White Corsair* had been specially built for kidnaping hostages, and he had not been particularly surprised to see the steel-walled, sound-proofed staterooms.

But he felt he should have guessed about the trick shutters, which, by the operation of a hidden catch in the molding, could be dropped down so that a portion of the corridor was isolated. He believed that both shutters should have dropped simultaneously, but one had become more rusted than the other, and had stuck. A second touch of the catch had been necessary.

Norman Conquest found himself admiring Glanford's cunning. There was nothing stingy about the Gay Desperado; he was ready with his bouquets, if they were deserved, for friend or foe alike. Glanford had been clever to walk backward and thus induce his victim to enter that fatal six feet of corridor.

"You can hear me, Conquest, can't you?" Glanford's voice again was penetrating the steel. "This is the end, so far as you are concerned."

"What does Mortimer think?" banted Norman Conquest. "He had me in

a flooded cellar once but he couldn't keep me there."

"This time you're going to be in a flooded steel prison," announced Preston Glanford, without any trace of gloating or jeering. He made the statement he might have used in reading a report at a company meeting. "There's no trapdoor through which you can escape when the water level rises. The only possible outlet is an eight-inch port-hole, and you can yell your head off and nobody will hear you. The nearest policeman is a mile away. Even if you were heard, nobody could help you in time. I'm going to open the sluices, and this crazy drydock will fill in a few minutes. I'm afraid you'll drown like a rat in a hole."

NORMAN CONQUEST whistled. He whistled a tune.

"You must remember that you are sought by the police for sabotage," continued the promoter, for the first time allowing a note of feeling to creep into his voice. "In the morning you will be found dead. You came aboard this yacht unauthorized, after hoodwinking the police. Somehow, you trapped yourself, and the drydock became accidentally flooded. My position is now excellent with you gone. I shall never be suspected. You got my finger, Conquest, but I got your life."

On the other side of the steel barrier the maker of defective military supplies turned away, and found Geoffrey Mortimer looking more like a human being and less like a swollen porpoise thrown up by the tide. Mortimer stared at him excitedly, his eyes prominent behind their big, horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Did you—mean—that?" he jerked hoarsely.

"I'll show you whether I meant it," sneered Glanford. "Come with me, Mortimer. It'll take two or three minutes, and the sooner we're away from this place, the better."

"But the police saw us come here," quavered his partner.

"Confound the police. They can't prove anything."

Glanford led the way up to the deck, and then "ashore." They walked along the dusty, uneven bank of the creek toward the lower end of the drained section, where the dam had been built.

Crude sluices were provided, so that, at the end of the operations the creek could be again flooded and the last remnants of the *White Corsair* hidden under water. The sluices were hand-operated, and had been locked in position ever since the dam had been constructed.

If Preston Glanford had been an engineer he might have hesitated. But he was not an engineer. He seized the great metal wheel which controlled the gearing, and removed the lock-catch. The wheel moved easily, and he commenced turning it. He commanded Mortimer to help. They both sweated at the work, and almost at once there came a rushing and roaring from the dam. Effort was not necessary. The control-wheel turned of its own accord, and soon they could not check it.

"It's got away from us," snapped Glanford, panting hard. "Never mind—all the better, perhaps. Come on, Mortimer! Run for your life!"

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE NICK OF TIME



OVER their shoulders, as they hurried away, Preston Glanford and Geoffrey Mortimer took one last look at the disappearing drydock. Already it was filling with muddy, scummy water, the brown flood swirling wildly as it rushed in from the nearby bay. From the melting dam there sounded an ever-increasing roar. The two men reached high ground, jumped into their car and in a few seconds were racing away from the scene.

"It's a pity we didn't shoot him," grumbled Mortimer in savage tones. "He's not dead yet, Glanford. I shan't be satisfied until I see his lifeless body."

"So we should have shot him," snarled Glanford, exasperated beyond measure. "And have the police ask us how he got full of holes? Honestly, Mortimer, there are times when I ask myself if you have any brains at all."

Meanwhile, Norman Conquest had reached the conclusion that shouting would have been a needless precaution. Optimist though he was, he felt what he needed now was about twenty-five pounds of dynamite, or a good-sized oxy-acetylene apparatus. Having

neither, all he could do was to look around and appreciate his own helplessness. It appeared to be a hopeless trap.

There was no way of getting out of the corridor. Those steel walls were immovable; locked into position by the secret mechanism that controlled them. The single doorway out of this shut-off section of corridor led into a smallish cabin.

The place was nearly bare, with the ornamental paneling peeling off the walls and revealing rusty steel beneath. The floor was of steel, and the ceiling was of steel. There was no ventilator. These cabins had been built for a special purpose.

Norman Conquest went to the little porthole and found that the glass had been removed. But he could scarcely get his head through the circular opening. He had been attracted, almost unconsciously, by the dull roar of the incoming water.

And now, suddenly, unexpectedly, his ears were smitten by a mighty, tumultuous roar, in which the shrieking crash of timbers sounded above the thunder of the water. He knew what had happened. The entire dam had suddenly given way.

"Well, I never did like waiting," he said philosophically.

Being no engineer, Preston Glanford had not known that the sluices could only be opened with safety at low tide. And at this particular hour the tide was full. The strain caused by the water rushing through the open sluices was far too great, and the whole barrier had collapsed.

The wall of water which literally fell into the drydock, was like an immense tidal wave. The force and weight of it were terrific. It struck the semi-demolished yacht like something solid, and the vessel rocked and reeled under the shock.

Thousands of tons of water fell into the well of the ship, astern, and things happened.

Norman Conquest, flung off his feet by the first violent impact, scrambled up to find the steel deck beneath him rocking and shaking like a building in an earthquake. He expected to see water pouring through the porthole at any moment. His ears were filled with the screaming tumult of rending steel, and

before he could properly get his breath came shock number two.

THAT first mass of falling water had burst one of the vessel's oil-bunkers. The crude oil, with terrific force, finding itself free, hurled itself in an almost solid mass at the bulkhead of the cabin next to Norman Conquest. "Without warning, the steel wall bulged, cracked under the pressure like a sheet of bursting paper, and the oil came pouring through in a black, glutinous flood.

"A sticky finish, if I'm any judge," said Norman Conquest steadily. "A pity about that crack."

He still had his electric torch. The light showed him the burst wall, through which the oil was spurting without any decrease of volume. The gap was only four or five inches wide, extending slantingly half-across the wall. No possibility of escape by that means. He suddenly stiffened, smitten by surprise.

The oil was nearly up to his waist already, and rising higher, and his light had just revealed something which came popping through the cracked wall on the flood of oil. It floated stickily.

He could see that it was a small metal dispatch-box of a curiously flat shape. In water it would have sunk like a stone. Only the heaviness of the oil had kept it temporarily on the surface.

Norman Conquest grabbed for the box. Not that it mattered much now. The case was beautifully made, the joints being practically water-tight. The lock was of the combination type.

"Here Glanford employs half the population of Italy to pull the bally yacht to pieces, just to find the prize, and the darned thing comes floating in and hits me in the chest," said Norman Conquest, with a sigh. "That's what novelists call a caprice of Fate. Brother Glibbey's secret record book."

He knew the dispatch box must have been concealed in some secret recess within the wall which had cracked open.

At that moment through the porthole was borne the sound of gun shots. He sprang to the tiny opening and glanced out. Across the platform he could see the edge of the dim woods and against them, the forms of several men running. They seemed to be roughly dressed. Each carried a weapon.

Even as he watched one of them stopped and raised his arm. From it came a sharp report and a flash of flame. Bang!

Then, also, Norman Conquest caught sight of the target. It was a slender figure which moved rapidly.

"Some chump having a mix-up with the guards," muttered Norman Conquest, marveling. "Wonder who he is?"

Before he could find an answer to the question the fugitive disappeared from view by springing out of sight behind a pile of lumber. "Plucky cuss," muttered Conquest. "Hope he gets away."

Even as he muttered this half aloud, a shot rang out from the lumber pile and one of the guards stumbled and fell in a heap. He did not move again.

"He got one, all right," said Conquest, forgetting all about his own predicament in interest in these proceedings.

The two remaining guards, there had only been three originally, now spread out and began to stalk the lumber pile. It began to seem as if they would succeed in trapping their prey. But the fugitive was clever as well as wary. A few moments later Norman Conquest heard the sound of light footsteps as someone mounted the scaffolding, next to the dismantled yacht.

Soon he saw a shadowy figure take cover behind some cases. Then came another bright flash as the fugitive fired again. A second guard fell to the ground. The third gave a yell of fear, dropped his weapon and took to his heels.

At this point Norman Conquest had no time for further observation. In the period which had elapsed during this brief episode the oil had continued to rise higher, and it was still coming in. Now it was almost up to his armpits, nearly level with the porthole.

BUT the water outside was also rising with devastating speed. In the first rush, when the wall of water had flung itself past the side, only a few dozen gallons had found their way inside. The first rush over, the general level had settled down for a time. Now it was beginning to come up with increasing rapidity.

Again Norman Conquest glanced through the little opening in the side of the hull. The small, slim figure beside

the packing cases was still there, knee deep in the flood. Something seemed familiar in the pose and the way the figure stood. Then he saw it was a girl and recognized her.

"Pixie!" he yelled, flashing his torchlight.

"What sort of a mess are you in?" came the girl's quick, calm voice. "I say, you'd better get out of that cabin, Desperado. Half of that first rush of water flooded the surrounding woods for a mile or two. It nearly drowned me. It's draining back now, and there's more coming in from the sea, in case you don't know it."

"Don't talk so much, young Pixie," retorted Norman Conquest. "Do you think I don't know all that? The water's only a foot below this rathole, and it'll be coming in to meet me in about three minutes. And I'd like you to know there's no other exit. Brother Glanford had most of the fun this time."

"You mean you are trapped in there?" The girl paused, her vocal cords paralyzed with sudden overwhelming horror. "Norman! You can't escape through that porthole?"

She paused again. The Gay Desperado took a couple of seconds off to marvel at the fact that, for the first time since they had met, she had called him "Norman." After all, why not? It was his name.

"Of course, I can escape through this porthole, chump," he bellowed. "What do you think I am, a rubber Mickey Mouse? If you'd make yourself useful instead of standing there looking scared, we might get somewhere. Whoa! This oil is swirling around my chest now. Pixie, do you think you can work that crane?"

"I'll try," said the girl, promptly.

Before she could move, however, there came an interruption. She gave a tiny scream and turned. Two bulky figures had suddenly moved into sight. Norman Conquest recognized them at once by the uniforms they wore. They were two of Isaiah Muggs' policemen.

"Young woman, was that you who was shootin' a gun a little while ago?" demanded the bigger of the two constables.

Even then Joy Everard did not lose her presence of mind. She remained alert and cool.

"Right you are," she said promptly. "They were two of Preston Glanford's guards. They have my friend trapped there in the steel hull of the yacht and are attempting to murder him. They'll succeed, too, if we don't act at once. Will you help me work the crane?"

"Why, sure," said the slighter of the two policemen. "I know about that crane. It's electric and gets juice from a power line. Come on, Miss."

It was a tall order to rescue Conquest and the two men and girl had to work fast. Time pressed, for the flood was rising. But they soon managed to get the contrivance moving, and it was Joy herself, who swung the crane arm around and lowered the hook. She could see the top of the water lapping the edge of the porthole and black oil come seeping out.

Within two or three minutes, at the utmost, the level would be over the top of that tiny opening and Norman Conquest's death would snap something within her and give her nightmares for the rest of her empty life.

Neither did Norman Conquest have any illusions. He knew it would be touch and go with all three of them working like mad.

He had never believed they could get the crane operating in time to help him. He had only suggested the idea as a sort of lost hope. But just as the water actually began to swirl into the opening, he saw the spidery arm come swinging around and his heart nearly missed a beat.

Norman Conquest retained his coolness. In times of acute danger his brain functioned at its best and now it seemed to be crystal clear. With her tiny hands Joy tried to adjust the cumbersome hook and, by herself, she might have failed. But one of the brawny policemen leaped to her aid and thrust it home. From the inside Norman Conquest assisted him.

THEN the policeman let out a stentorian yell that sounded even above the roar of the flood.

"Up, up, Bill!" he shouted. "Give it everything you can manage."

There was the clank of machinery, the steel cable tightened and then—a terrific strain.

Half choked with oil, the water gur-

gling about his eyes and ears, Norman Conquest saw the metal around the porthole begin to bend and crumple. Then with a sharp rending noise and the screech of steel, the whole framework sagged outward and disappeared from sight. The porthole was gone, taking a plate with it.

And through the opening dived Norman Conquest, wriggling free like an otter. He was free at last!

CHAPTER IX

REWARD FOR SERVICES



NARROW squeak as I'm ever likely to enjoy," said Norman Conquest, ten minutes later. "So narrow that if I had weighed a couple of pounds more I should never have made it. But I just managed and a miss is as good as a mile."

They were standing on the bank, near the woodland path, and Joy Everard was looking at him with glowing eyes. His utter coolness after such a hideous experience left her breathless. The policemen were conferring a short distance away, trying to decide what they ought to do next.

"Don't you think you ought to yell, or whoop, or something?" she asked happily. "It's not fair to look so composed, Desperado. It's not natural, either."

"What's the good of yelling, or whooping?" retorted Conquest. "Be sensible, young Pixie. I'm going to do something a lot better than yelling and whooping."

Then despite the two policemen, he lifted her off her feet and kissed her gratefully.

"A bit oily, but not bad," she said in breathless tones when he set her down.

"Now perhaps you'll tell me why the dickens you were standing on that bank instead of being back in The Harvester House?" asked Norman Conquest.

"An accident," she replied. "I heard a car pull up outside the police station and thought I'd take a look. I saw Glanford go into the place, and when he came out he paused under the light, and his face was just plain murder. So when the car started back toward the woods, I took a short-cut. Those private guards

of Glanford saw me and followed."

"Yes, they would follow, all right," replied Norman Conquest. "You risked your life in—"

"Norman Conquest. I want you!"

These stern words, cutting in upon their careless chatter, interrupted them harshly. Norman Conquest swung around and despite the darkness, recognized Inspector Williams at once. Unnoticed, the State policemen had joined the two men from Isaiah Muggs' force. The stocky police chief also showed in the background.

"Do tell, Inspector," answered Norman Conquest. "I believe you have also met Miss Everard. So you crave my company?"

"You're under arrest, as is also Miss Everard," continued Inspector Williams patiently. "We want to question you about— Shut up, Muggs!"

The unfortunate Chief Muggs, having realized that "Captain Anstruther" was indeed the notorious Norman Conquest, was frantically bleating his excuses. Conquest felt sorry for him. Something ought to be done about it.

He commenced by fishing out the metal dispatch box which, despite his predicament, he had managed to salvage from the yacht.

"You're making a mistake in identity, Inspector," he said. "Chief Muggs, here, is right. I am Captain Anstruther of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. After examining the contents of this I am positive you will agree with me and with Chief Muggs."

He handed Mr. Williams the flat metal dispatch-box.

"What's this?"

"A little documentary evidence concerning the activities of Messrs. Glanford, Mortimer and Gibley," replied Norman Conquest. "I found it aboard the *White Corsair*. I suggest shooting the lock off as the quickest way of opening it. I further suggest that you do it now."

His tone was smooth and yet so compelling that Inspector Williams, after hesitation, gave a nod to the constables, who had clustered around. Inspector Williams himself withdrew a short distance, and a moment later two or three sharp reports rang out.

"By heavens!" observed Mr. Williams some minutes later.

Aided by an electric torch, he had been taking a look at the contents of the dispatch box. A single minutes' dip was staggeringly enlightening. The fact Preston Glanford had commenced his gas-mask racket some months earlier had led to the inclusion of entertaining facts and figures in the late Nicholas Gibley's records. That item alone was sufficient to dictate the detective-inspector's next move.

HE JOINED the others and his first action was to shake Norman Conquest's hand warmly.

"My apologies, Captain Anstruther," said Inspector Williams with the utmost solemnity, "congratulations, sir. Washington will be pleased. Needless to say the arrest was a mistake."

Chief Muggs was making strange gobbling noises.

"What—what did you say?"

"I owe you an apology, too, Chief," said the man from the State police.

"You can rely upon me to put in a good word for you in the right quarters. The help you have extended to Captain Anstruther has probably been useful. I don't think we need make any further search for that elusive fellow, Norman Conquest."

"I've heard he's quite a nice chap," said Conquest. "A bit playful at times, but he generally has a reason."

"He had reason enough this time," retorted Williams, with conviction. "The Government had already discovered those gas masks were duds but Glanford disclaimed responsibility both for the crooked testing devices and the traitorous inspectors who passed them. We had no proof against him until now. But this evidence settles it and he'll probably end in the electric chair. And now if you'll excuse me, Captain Anstruther," and by the light of the electric torches Conquest saw his eyelid flicker as he glanced toward Joy, "I must call up the superintendent and put Glanford and Mortimer behind bars. You two had better run along now."

He was a very good prophet. When Norman Conquest, immaculate and debonair once more, looked in at the police station exactly an hour later, he found the State police detective sitting placidly in the easiest chair, smoking.

"Arrested both of them at Glanford's house," he told Conquest. "Took 'em by surprise, and that was that." He gave Norman Conquest a friendly look. "We've been going through these records. Pretty reading, very pretty. If those two sharks escape the death penalty they'll be supermen."

Norman Conquest nodded, his quartz-gray eyes twinkling wickedly.

"I just popped in to say my daughter and I are moving on first thing in the morning," he said, extending a lean brown hand. "Glad to have made your acquaintance, Inspector Williams. One of these days we may meet again."

Inspector Williams nodded and yawned.

"I was going to suggest that it might be better for all concerned if you and your—er—daughter left without any unnecessary delay, Captain Anstruther," he said. "I dare say this town is a trifle dull for a lively girl such as she. By the way, if you ever happen to meet a certain Miss Everard, you might tell her that she can go home whenever she likes."

"You don't mind if she entertains a gentleman friend?"

"I'm all for it," replied Inspector Williams heartily.

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2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently



3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves



4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by flossing handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges



You've Got to Have

CHAPTER I

THE GREATEST DETECTIVE

CAL ZEIGLAR, who handled publicity for Atlas Studios, was disgusted. In the three years since he had stepped into the berth, he had been called upon to do many things, but never anything quite as silly as the assignment which the little producer had now handed him.

Samuel Braun, whose short, stubby fingers contained the magic which had lifted Atlas from one of the lesser minors into the majors group, believed in mottos.

His big richly furnished office was filled with them.

Framed, they made up the only decoration which marred the expensive cork walls.

Braun was pointing to one now and

Cal Zeiglar Takes a Dangerous Crime



*A Smashing
Complete
Novelet*

and fired at the speeding car

Homicide

By
W. T. BALLARD

Zeiglar knew what it said without turning his eyes.

Can't Is Not in the Atlas Dictionary.

Zeiglar yawned, deeply, wishing that he had had more sleep the night before. Braun saw the yawn and it increased his excitement.

"If you would keep awake," he said, "I would not have to repeat myself. I tell you, it is the greatest idea since

Garbo said, 'I want to be alone!'"

"She never said it," Zeiglar corrected him.

"So she never said it—a million million people think she did, which is enough. Look, Cal. This is stupendous, see? We bring Rude out here—he is already here. We make a picture with him, the greatest detective in the world, playing himself in a story. But he isn't happy. The studio bores him. The town

Trail—and Lands in a Double Frame!

bores him. Why? Because he has to have murder. He goes down and hangs around Lincoln Heights, just to keep from being homesick."

"It smells bad."

"So it smells bad," the producer admitted, "but still it is a great idea. You will call up the chief. You will arrange with the detectives. Maybe—who knows—Rude might solve a case while we are shooting the picture. That would mean plenty at the box office. Get going now—right away. . . ."

Tim Rude, as Zeiglar knew, was a great detective. Rude admitted it himself. He had started his career as a patrolman on the Chicago force, but he was too clever to stay there long.

Once in plain clothes, he had cracked four big cases within the space of one year, quit the force and opened his own agency. His methods were not orthodox. He was known as the man of a hundred faces because of his ability at disguise, and he knew how to get publicity. That publicity had made him a national figure. At thirty, he was almost as well known as a movie star, and glad to fall in with Atlas' plans to make him one by using him in a B picture.

"He is a ham," Zeiglar thought, as he waited in the lobby of the detective's hotel.

Zeiglar himself was far from bad looking. Not quite thirty, not quite six feet, he wore horn-rimmed glasses, though there was nothing the matter with his eyes. He merely thought the glasses made him look studious.

A quiet man, he often drank alone, not because he lacked friends, but because he knew too many people. His friends came from all walks of life—gamblers, bookies, fight promoters. He had handled their publicity before going to work for the studio. He was honest, not from any moral sense, but because it paid better in the long run.

He turned as Rude came out of the elevator. He had to admit that the man looked handsome in a healthy sort of way, and there was nothing phony in his handshake.

"What is this?" the detective asked from the corner of his mouth. "I'd rather hit the night spots and see the pretty gals. There's a lot I haven't met yet."

Cal Zeiglar shrugged. "It's Braun's

idea," he told Rude, "and Braun puts out for your pay check. You're going down to the jail and like it."

"I may go down there"—Rude gave him a twisted grin—"but I won't like it, chum. I've seen too many jails in my time. I always figure there's a fifty-fifty chance that some day little Timmy will land behind bars."

Zeiglar did not answer, but turning, led his charge toward the waiting cab. As Rude bent his head to get in, his coat fell open, exposing the shoulder holster with its gun. Zeiglar did not comment until the cab was in motion.

"You won't need that thing," he said then. "We'll ride around in a couple of prowl cars, talk to the boys and get some pictures taken. Then we can head for the night spots."

Tim Rude showed his twisted grin. "All right, Junior, but I never do anything without little Betsy at my side, unless it's to take a bath. A lot of people don't like me much."

Zeiglar shrugged. A lot of people didn't like him, either, but he didn't go around bragging about it. This guy was probably a phony after all.

Lincoln Heights looked dark and deserted. A block over, city-bound traffic rolled along despite the gas shortage, but on the street before the big jail there was no movement, no light save from the pale street lamps, the jail windows and the offices of the bail bond brokers.

They stood in front of the jail, waiting for the photographers who should have been there and were not. Then a big car turned into the end of the street and cruised toward them and Zeiglar let out his breath slowly. "Here come the picture snatchers now," he said.

But it was not the photographers. Instead of losing speed, the car quickened its pace as it reached the front of the jail. Suddenly Tim Rude shouted a warning. His hand hit Zeiglar's shoulder, spinning the publicity man about. Zeiglar had sense enough to drop. He had been in tight places before, and he did not need a second warning.

RUDE whirled around, wrenching the gun from under his coat, and even as shots hammered at them from the speeding car, he fired into the side of the big sedan. But his shots failed to

find the driver, for the car went on, its speed increasing as it shot down the deserted street, to disappear around the corner.

Zeiglar picked himself off the hard sidewalk. Rude's mouth lifted in the funny, twisted grin.

"A nice performance." He was putting his gun back into place.

The door behind them burst open. The booking sergeant and a couple of tank guards were shouting questions. Zeiglar tried to answer them. He tried to talk to the reporters who materialized. In the middle of the excitement, the photographers from the studio arrived. The pictures were swell, everything was swell until one of the cops told Zeiglar that the captain wanted to see him.

Captain Chandler was big and tough, but he didn't look like a police captain. He looked a little like Herbert Hoover. He was in his office at the City Hall when they came in, having ridden down in a prowl car, and he started talking as soon as they walked into the room.

"Look," he told Zeiglar. "I've put up with you and your screwy gags for years, but enough is enough. There's a war on. The Department is overworked, and we want no more of your foolishness."

Zeiglar looked hurt. "Now listen, Cap. That was no gag. Those guys in that car—"

"Were hired by the studio," Chandler cut him short. "It was a swell build-up for your punk picture. 'Noted detective is threatened. Rude shot at while making picture.'" He blew out his cheeks angrily until they resembled twin balloons. "That's enough! We don't want any more, see? If there is, I'll toss you both in the can for disturbing the peace. Got me?"

Zeiglar got him. He knew when you could argue with Chandler and when you couldn't. This was one of the times that you couldn't. He nodded and led Rude out of the office.

In the cab, riding back toward Hollywood, he said under his breath:

"Look, pal. Who were those monkeys in that black jalopy, and why were they sharpening their teeth for you?"

Rude turned his head. There was just enough light for Zeiglar to see the smile which twisted the man's lips.

"Gunning for me?" He sounded surprised. "You're wrong, chum. They weren't gunning for me. They must have been shooting at you. Everyone in this town loves me like a brother, including the cops."

Zeiglar sighed. No use arguing here, either.

"Okay—okay," he said. "Where do you want to head now?"

"That joint of Kewpie Doll's," Rude said promptly. "I've already had a yen to see that dump."

When the taxi deposited them before the night spot Zeiglar didn't want to go into the joint. It was a big place, big enough to house a super market, or to serve as an airplane hangar. It was neither. It was a dance hall.

Los Angeles was loaded with such places. They had sprung up in the last year, catering to the war workers, the soldiers on leave, and the average citizens.

The town, Cal thought sadly, was changing. Gone were the flash places, the small intimate spots with their tiny floors and smaller bars, the spots where you had to be a big shot in pictures to get in.

THEY had been forced to close, because the movie great had learned that they could have more fun, more excitement, for less money at the newer swing palaces which were frequented by jitterbugs in zoot suits, lady welders from Douglas and Lockheed, and swing shift people who worked from four in the afternoon to midnight and played the rest of the dark hours.

Closing time had been forgotten, liquor was bootlegged after hours, and gambling ran in the back rooms. It was the gold rush of Nineteen Forty-two, and the racket boys, who had been starved out by the depression, and the return of legal liquor, were coming back.

The Granda was no different from a dozen other places. Two name bands, who broadcast every week over a national hookup, alternated with each other so that the tireless jitterbugs would not wait between numbers.

Hurrying waiters pushed their way between the crowded tables, serving drinks, and the crowd before the long bar was three deep.

Zeiglar felt out of place in this crowd of shipyard workers, airplane mechanics and radio technicians. He looked around, hoping to see someone he knew, but it was Rude who spotted the crowd at the far side of the big dance floor.

"There's Paula Hunt over there. Introduce me."

Zeiglar followed his pointing finger. The girl he meant was at a table with Ben South and Martin Hyler, two more people. South was a producer at Atlas. Paula Hunt was new to Hollywood, a dancer from New York who had brought out a picture or so, and Hyler was her director.

Cal Zeiglar hesitated. He didn't want to go to that table. He and South didn't get along, but Rude was insistent. They threaded their way through the crowd, rounded the corner of the dance floor and came up to the table.

South looked at them with no pleasure, nor did he make any effort to rise. Hyler came to his feet, however, and Paula Hunt looked up with a smile.

She was a small girl, with nice features and hair so dark it looked almost blue.

"Hello, there," she greeted.

Cal Zeiglar said hello. He was used to beautiful women. It was part of his job to see that they stayed beautiful, and usually they left him as cold as if they had been wax models. But this girl was different. There was fire in her, and quick humor, and understanding.

"This is what we get for slumming," South muttered. "Anyone can stop at your table."

Zeiglar ignored him. Someday, when he wasn't too busy, he meant to do something about South. In his book, the guy was a no good heel. But now was not the time.

"I want you all to meet the world's greatest detective, Tim Rude," he said.

"Hello, Detective!" Paula Hunt motioned to a place at her side. "Sit down and tell me about all your murders."

Rude was quick to accept her invitation. Ben South did not like it. His heavy face darkened with anger. The look made Zeiglar want to grin, and his mind was busy. He could cook up a romance between these two. "Detective goes for dancer!" It would be a good headline.

But some way, he didn't like it. Rude was too good-looking, too certain of himself. Paula Hunt might take the press notices seriously. Actresses have been known to marry strange people. Why not a detective?

CHAPTER II

UNEXPECTED MELEE



ZEIGLAR sat there wondering why he should care. He hadn't seen the dancer more than four or five times in his life. She was nothing to him—just another girl he was supposed to glorify.

He never knew what made him look up. Maybe it was some kind of sixth sense, but he did look up, and when he did he knew that he was seeing trouble walk toward them.

The man in the lead wore a dinner coat, but he had no business wearing a dinner coat. It made him look funny. He should have been wearing purple tights and been in the ring. He looked like one of the grunt and groan boys, a wrestler. His body was almost square, his shoulders nearly as broad as he was high, and the men behind him looked as if they were character actors in a gangster picture. Only they weren't acting. This was the real thing.

The square man was "Kewpie" Doll. It was a strange name for a man who had once run liquor, who now was running the Granda, and who had beaten three raps in the East by the skin of his yellowed teeth.

Everyone at the table had looked up. Zeiglar heard someone draw a sharp breath. He glanced about and had a fleeting glimpse of Tim Rude's face. It was white, set, and if he'd ever seen fear in a man's eyes, he saw it mirrored in Rude's dark pupils. The detective's hand had disappeared inside his coat, and his eyes were riveted on the advancing men.

Zeiglar wasted no time. He didn't know what this was all about, and there was no chance to find out.

"Rude," he said crisply, "get out of here. Take Paula with you. I'll cover."

He was used to being obeyed. He didn't wait to see if he was now. He came to his feet, his arms at his sides, well away from his own gun. He wanted

no open trouble if it could be avoided. A place like this was like a keg of powder; a spark, and one of the biggest riots in history would be under way.

He turned his big body so that it almost blocked the view of the table from the advancing men, and moved forward to meet them. The space was so limited, the room between the crowded tables so small, that they had no chance to crowd past him.

"Hold it, Kewpie," he said and smiled faintly.

The square man paused, staring at him with unblinking eyes.

"Keep out of this, Cal."

"No," said Zeiglar. "This is my business, Kewpie. Call off your dogs, send them away. There isn't going to be any trouble tonight."

Behind him he heard the scrape of moving chairs. He dared not look around, dared not take his eyes from Kewpie Doll's twisted features.

"Keep out of this, Zeiglar," Doll said again in his toneless voice.

He started to walk again, looking like a moving block of concrete. Behind him, "Blacksmith" Burns said:

"He's getting out, Chief! He's getting away."

Blacksmith was a little man with a funny, pointed nose. He looked more like a ferret than anything else. His eyes were bright blue and were set close together. He pulled his gun now, and tried to shove past his boss.

A woman at a table beside him got halfway to her feet. She was a big girl, and she wore slacks. In her hand was a heavy leather purse. The purse made a half arc in the air and came down against Blacksmith's wrist. He let out a squawk that you could hear above the loud, razzing beat of the heavy music.

ZEIGLAR chose this moment to move. There was no use playing around. You either did something, or you would be shoved out of the way. He stepped in, and crossed his right to Kewpie's chin. It was like hitting cast iron. Pain ran up through his wrist clear to his elbow.

Doll's head jerked back, but he didn't lose balance. He let out a bellow like an outraged bull, and reached for Zeiglar with his short powerful arms.

Zeiglar stepped back, quickly. If

those arms ever closed about him, he could say good-bye to all his ribs. His heel caught in the rung of a chair and he fell backward. That probably saved his life, for a gun spat behind him, and a bullet sang above his falling head.

Someone screamed, and the riot was on. Zeiglar made no motion to get up. Instead, he rolled sideward until he was under the protection of a sheltering table. There he stayed as a thousand feet milled around him.

There was no chance to get up. No chance to escape. The fight had become general. No one knew what it was about, and few cared. Most of the crowd was young, most of them worked hard and had little chance for recreation. A fight was a fight, and they turned to with a will.

Not until the police arrived was there any order brought out of the chaos. Zeiglar rose as soon as the crowd stopped milling around, and retreated toward the door. A lot of other people had the same idea. The fight was over, so was the fun. The cops were busily trying to place the blame, too busy to notice Zeiglar.

Once outside, Zeiglar called Rude's hotel from a booth in the corner drug-store, got no response and hung up. He stood debating what he should do. Rude was over twenty-one, and should be able to take care of himself.

But was he? Who had fired at the detective on the jail steps, and why had Kewpie Doll and his men moved in on the table?

Zeiglar cared nothing about Rude, but the studio had already invested money in the detective-actor, and Braun would cry like a baby if anything happened to the man. With a weary sigh, Zeiglar found another nickel and called Paula Hunt.

The girl answered the phone herself.

"Yes," she said. "He's here, in the other room. He wants you to come up."

Zeiglar swore under his breath. He was beginning to feel like an errand boy. He'd had about enough of Rude, and Rude's troubles. It was bad enough to fake publicity, but it was quite another thing to buck a guy like Kewpie Doll. Doll didn't have any sense of humor. When he told you to keep out of things, he meant exactly what he said.

Doll was not going to forget that Zeiglar had stood up to him. Worse, he might do something about it.

The apartment in which Paula Hunt lived was outside the dimout beach area, a big building with three penthouses on its roof. The penthouses were reached by an elevator which opened on an ell from the main lobby.

Zeiglar had been there before. In fact, he had rented the place for the girl before her arrival from New York.

He did not go near the desk, but moved directly to the ell, and the automatic car lifted him the dozen stories to the roof. He left the car, went along a terracelike walk and knocked on her door.

A moment later a voice called:

"Who is it?"

"Me," Zeiglar said with impatience. "Cal Zeiglar."

HE HEARD the night chain withdrawn, saw the door swing inward, and then saw Paula Hunt.

His first thought was of her smallness. It always startled him. She was just five-one, and he looked down almost upon the top of her head.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

He stared at her. "Who did you expect me to bring—the Army?"

She flushed, and when she spoke her voice had an angry sound.

"This is no time for cheap humor, Cal Zeiglar. We've got enough trouble."

"Trouble?" He didn't understand her. "What trouble now?"

Instead of answering, she stepped backward away from the door. He came in, and closed it, then she led the way down the hall without speaking.

A closed door on the right led to a kind of den or small lounging room. She pushed this open, clicked up the light, then she stepped out of the way.

Zeiglar was about to speak to her, then he didn't. For his eyes had gone beyond her small figure to where Rude lay on the beige-colored couch. He lay on his back, as if he were asleep, or perhaps had passed out from too much liquor. His mouth was open a little, his eyes tight closed.

Zeiglar started to swear, then stopped. Something about the way the body was twisted had caught his eye. Wordlessly he stepped past the girl, crossed the lit-

tle room in three quick strides and bent above the detective.

Rude was dead. Zeiglar had not been able to see the knife wound from the doorway, the man's coat had fallen sideways, concealing it. But now he could see the slit in the white shirt, and the dark stain which was spreading.

He looked down, and saw the knife on the rug at his feet. It had an ornate handle, and he guessed that it had been used as a letter opener. The blade was long, and thin, and pointed—more like an enormous needle than a knife—a perfect tool for the work it had done.

He drew his breath in sharply as a thought came to him. Samuel Braun had wanted publicity. He had said that Rude had to have murder to make him happy. The actor-detective had found murder all right, but Zeiglar doubted greatly if it had made the man happy. Certainly his expression showed no enjoyment as he lay there on Paula Hunt's couch.

The thought made Zeiglar turn to face the girl.

"When did this happen?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me over the phone?"

"It hadn't happened then," she said steadily. "I went out, shortly after you called. I went down to the lobby to straighten out a matter with the manager. I left Rude in here. He was looking at my scrap-book. When I came back he was like this."

Zeiglar turned again to look at the body. What the girl was saying was apparently the truth. He saw now that the wound was fresh. He bent and touched the dead man's wrist. There was still warmth, and he noted that the face had not entirely lost all of its color. Tim Rude had been dead for minutes only.

He swore softly to himself, trying to think, trying to foresee what this death might mean. It meant of course that all the studio's plans for Rude were washed out, all the work they had done on the picture was lost.

BUT it could mean a lot more than that. Paula Hunt was coming up. Her first picture, as yet unreleased, was good, and her second was even then in production. But she was not established. Bad publicity could kill her

chances even before she got started. It was too bad. She could dance. Her singing voice was all right, and she seemed like a nice, smart, sensible kid. And there were not so many sensible kids in this town.

He whistled tonelessly under his breath, trying to decide what to do. As if in answer to his thoughts, someone pounded on the door. He glanced at her, quickly.

"Expecting someone?"

She shook her head. Her face was tight, pinched-looking, and there was fear deep in her eyes.

The pounding got louder, and after another minute, Zeiglar turned and went into the hall. He did not know who he expected to find outside the penthouse door, but he certainly did not expect the police.

There were three of them, with Captain Chandler in the lead, and Chandler's voice had an unpleasant sound when he said:

"I might have known you'd be here."

Zeiglar looked at him coolly, but behind his mask of unperturbed indifference, his mind was racing.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't be here," he told the detective captain, "but I'm surprised to see you."

"I'll bet," Chandler elbowed his broad body into the hall. "Okay. Where is he?"

"Where's who?"

"Look," said Chandler. "I've been watching you for a lot of years, Cal. You publicity boys are all alike. You get away with one thing after another until you think you're living in a nice quiet little world of your own where anything you want to try will work. But you're not going to get away with murder, brother, not while I'm running the Homicide Squad. Where's Rude's body?"

Zeiglar was beyond surprise. His tongue, which in ordinary circumstances could find words to meet any situation, failed him now. He merely jerked his head toward the open door which led to the small den, then followed Chandler's square shoulders through the opening.

Chandler grunted as he saw the body, then he turned his head and there was contempt in his gaze as he looked first at the silent girl, then at Zeiglar.

"You guys would do anything in the world to get a story on Page One," he growled.

"Now wait—"

"You wait."

Chandler had pulled a cloth package of tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette with one of his blunt-fingered hands. He did it automatically, never taking his eyes from Zeiglar's face.

"I know what happened," he said. "You planned it nicely. You had this jane"—he jerked his head toward the silent dancer—"pretend to stab Rude with the knife. The story was that he was amusing himself, breaking into her apartment for practice, that she mistook him for a real burglar, and stabbed him.

"You were going to break the skin with the point of the knife, just so he would bleed a little, and presto, you had two of Atlas' feature players with their names all over Page One. But somehow, Rude's foot slipped. He fell as you were faking the blow. He fell on the knife."

"I don't know where you got this hooley," Zeiglar said, "but it didn't happen that way."

"Okay." Chandler struck a match on his thumb-nail and held the resulting flame to the crimped end of his cigarette. "You tell me how it happened."

ZEIGLAR shook his head.

"We don't know. I wasn't here—hadn't arrived yet. Miss Hunt left Rude here while she went downstairs to talk to the building manager. Rude was this way when she returned. Now, you tell me something. Where did you get this bunch of hooley you've just dished out? And how did you happen to show up here at this moment?"

"We didn't happen to," said Chandler. "Someone called us and told us what had happened. He didn't give a name, but you know who it was."

"I know?"

"Sure," said the detective captain. "He told me he was here when it happened, but he didn't want any part of the mess."

"And he didn't give a name?"

"Would you?" asked Chandler.

"You're a bigger sucker than I thought, copper," Cal Zeiglar said de-

liberately. "I'll roast you for this when it clears up. Listen to me. Someone was after Rude. Someone took a whack at him on the jail steps. Kewpie Doll was going to manhandle him at the Granda if I hadn't got in the way. Someone killed him all right, but it wasn't me, and it was no publicity gag. Give us a break, chum. You're going to ruin this little girl."

"I'm going to ruin you," said Chandler. "You've spent years putting people's names on Page One. I'm going to put yours there, and then I'm going to send you to a place where they'll give you a number, if they don't decide to give you a whack at the gas chamber."

"But—"

"No buts. Come on."

CHAPTER III

A BLONDE APPEARS



MANY times Zeiglar had been at Police Headquarters, but never as a prisoner charged with murder. He knew that Chandler was giving him the business. He sat in the little room, with the bright lights driving into his eyes and answered their questions over and over.

Finally a man came in and laid something on the table. Chandler came out of the darkness behind the lights, picked it up, studied it for a moment, then thrust it into Zeiglar's hands.

Cal Zeiglar's eyes burned from staring steadily into the lights. He was almost too tired to read, but he stared at the typewritten pages which the detective captain had thrust into his hands and read:

DETECTIVE STABBED BY STAR

Tim Rude, Practicing Lock Picking Gets Caught
Man of Hundred Faces Stabbed in Chest

The story went on to describe how, for a gag, the detective actor, Tim Rude, had picked his way into Paula Hunt's penthouse. How the actress had mistaken him for a burglar and stabbed him with a letter opener. The story continued:

Except for luck, the letter opener might have killed Rude . . .

Zeiglar looked up. His throat was so

dry that he almost croaked:

"Where did you get this?"

"From the desk in your apartment." Chandler sounded pleased. "You apparently wrote it some time today. Now, do you still claim that this wasn't some fake publicity that misfired?"

Zeiglar tried to stare at the man, but the lights hurt his eyes so badly that he had to close them. Closing them was a good idea, because it gave him a chance to think. If Chandler was telling the truth, someone had broken into his apartment, written this story on his typewriter, and left it for the police to find. Someone was deliberately framing him for Rude's murder.

The thought stirred his tired senses and made him straighten. As he did, the phone rang. Chandler picked it up, and from his grunts, Zeiglar judged that the detective captain was not enjoying the conversation.

When he put it down, he said in a disappointed voice:

"Okay, Zeiglar, that's all for now. Your mouthpiece is outside."

Cal Zeiglar blinked, then rose slowly to his feet and picked up his coat. Sweat made dark, damp patches on his blue shirt. He was almost punch-drunk with weariness as he went heavily to the door.

Outside the air was damp and cool. It brought life back into his big body and took away the fuzzy cobwebs which were messing about his brain.

Paula Hunt was in the cab. So was Arklin Mathers, the studio attorney. The Yellow's springs sagged as Zeiglar added his bulk to the weight of the other passengers and slammed the door.

"Hello, shyster," he greeted.

Mathers did not like to be called a shyster. He was a precise little man who parted his thinning hair in the middle and wore rimless glasses.

"I've always expected you to wind up in the death chamber, Zeiglar," he said.

"Don't bet on it," the publicity man told him. "How'd you know where we were? How'd you spring us?"

Mathers said: "A reporter, spotted you being taken into the jail and called Braun for a statement. Sam's fit to be tied. He wants to see you, now."

"But how'd you get us out?" Zeiglar persisted. "It was a murder charge, wasn't it?"

The lawyer shrugged. "They were holding Miss Hunt as a material witness. They had you booked for manslaughter. I guess they didn't figure they could make a murder charge stick. I got a writ for both of you."

"Thanks," Zeiglar said. "You can let me out at the next corner. There's a cop car trailing us. It will give him something to think of."

"But Sam wants to see you."

"Let him wait," said Zeiglar bitterly. "This was his idea in the first place. He got his murder. I hope he likes it. . . ."

THE hotel which Tim Rude had chosen for his Hollywood residence was big, and swanky and important. Zeiglar went in through the cocktail bar. He used one of the rear elevators and rode it to the tenth floor. The door offered little trouble to a good skeleton key and it took him little time to gain entrance to the two rooms which Rude had occupied.

Zeiglar switched on the lights and looked around. He didn't know what he was hunting for. He wasn't even certain there was anything to hunt for, but he had not been in the room more than a minute before he realized that the someone else had had the same idea.

The police probably had searched the place, but no police officer would have been as ruthless as the unknown who had scattered the dead detective's belongings from one end of the suite to the other. It looked as if a cyclone had hit the place. Zeiglar took a long look at the ripped pillows and upended drawers, then switched off the light and left the room. Apparently there had been something in the suite, something that someone had wanted badly, but if it had been there, it wouldn't be there now.

He rode down in the elevator, got a cab and drove home. He was so tired that he didn't notice the crack of light under his apartment door, didn't know the place was occupied until he stepped in. Then it was too late to back out. He was trapped.

Kewpie Doll sat in the chair beside the window, calmly going through the contents of Zeiglar's desk. Two of his men lounged against the far wall, their eyes on the door.

"Come in," said Doll. "We've been waiting for you."

Burning anger filled Zeiglar's veins with an insistent fire. He had been pushed around about as much as any one man could stand.

"What in all creation do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

Doll discarded a bunch of receipted gas bills and looked up.

"Just looking," he said coolly.

"Go some place else and look," said Zeiglar. "I want to go to bed."

Doll regarded him thoughtfully. "I owe you something for that poke in the chin, chum. You evened it by sticking that letter knife in Tim Rude, even if it was an accident."

"I didn't stick him," snapped Zeiglar.

Doll considered the thought as if it were a new one.

"So you didn't stick him." He was being dangerously agreeable. "I don't care who opened up the rat, so long as he's dead. What I want are his papers. They were in a brown leather briefcase. It isn't at his hotel. Where is it?"

Zeiglar didn't know, and said so.

"Look, Kewpie," he said. "I'm not interested in any briefcase, or any papers, or anything else. I'm a guy who minds his own business, and right now, my business is sleep. Scram, and let me do it, will you?"

Doll rose slowly. "I ought to poke you." He spoke as if talking to himself. "Maybe I will, if you try anything smart. Right now, I'm not sure—"

He motioned to his men and they moved toward the door. Doll followed. At the entrance, he paused, looked back, changed his mind and went out, shutting the door softly behind him. . . .

POUNDING on the door awakened Zeiglar from a bad dream. He had dreamed that he was at the bottom of a well, and that Chandler was pouring water on him. He struggled up, found a robe, and padded toward the door, pulling it open.

There was a girl outside, the sun from the hall window striking her light hair and making it look like spun gold. She didn't ask if she could come in. She just shoved the gun against Zeiglar's stomach and walked him backward.

He was too surprised to speak, too stupid from sleep to think clearly. He just backed up, raising his hands slowly.

The girl shut the door and made cer-

tain that it was locked. Her gun never wavered as she used her free hand to turn the key.

"That's right," she said. "Be nice and no one will be hurt."

Zeiglar sank down on a chair, still careful to keep his hands well above his head. The sleep was fading from his mind and it was beginning to work.

"What is this, Junior, a game?"

"No game," she said. "I ought to plug you for knifing the boss, but accidents are accidents. Turn over his briefcase and we'll forget it."

Zeiglar wanted to laugh, and didn't. There was a hint of steel about this blonde's blue eyes that told him she was in no laughing mood.

"Listen"—he was getting tired, holding his arms in the air—"I don't get this. I suppose from what you said that you worked for Tim Rude. If so, I've only got two things to tell you. First, I didn't kill your boss. Second, I don't know where his briefcase is. I never saw it, and you aren't the first to ask me."

She stared at him, a considering expression on her oval face. He had never seen as pretty a girl look so fierce. He decided that if here was a sample of women detectives, he didn't want any part of them. She looked as if she couldn't make up her mind whether to pull the trigger or hit him over the head with the gun. In the end, she did neither.

"The name is Stella," she said in a musical voice. "Stella Alden. I worked for Tim Rude, and I want that case."

"If you want the case, ask the police." He was certain they didn't have it, but he didn't know what else to say. "And if you worked for Rude, why aren't you in Chicago?"

"They wired me last night. I got in on the noon plane."

He twisted his wrist so that he could see the watch. It was two o'clock, and he whistled. He certainly had slept a long time. It was a wonder the studio hadn't called. He turned as if to ask the telephone operator, and then he understood. The instrument had been jerked loose from its wires.

That, he thought, was probably Kewpie Doll's work. He looked back, to find the blonde studying him.

"I'll make a deal, Zeiglar," she said.

"That case is worth dough. Now that Rude is dead, it should belong to me. We were kind of partners, but I'll need help. I'll cut you in a third."

He pretended to be impressed. "Now you're talking sense, Junior. If you said a half, I might listen."

Watching her eyes, he could see the battle that was going on in her mind. She couldn't decide whether to grant him a half or not, and he smiled, secretly. Finally she nodded.

"Okay. A half."

"We're partners," he said. "You wouldn't want a paralyzed partner. I'll be that if I don't get these hands down."

SHE nodded, and he lowered his arms gratefully. Already his fingers felt a little numb, and he flexed them to return the circulation.

"The case is in the bed, between the springs and the mattress," he said.

She went past him eagerly, unsuspectingly, the gun dangling carelessly from her forefinger. He let her get past, then his right hand snaked out and caught her wrist, just above the gun.

She let out a little yelp of surprise and tried to turn, fighting him desperately. But his other hand had her forearm and was twisting it up behind her shoulder blades.

"Let go," he said tightly, "or I'll break the wing."

She let go, and the gun slid to the carpet. He stooped, still holding her with one hand and, scooping up the gun, dropped it into the pocket of his robe.

"Stop it," he told her, for she was spitting like an angry cat. "What did you expect when you walked in here with a gun? That I'd kiss you?"

"Gimme the case!" she demanded.

"I told you the truth in the first place." He let go his grip on her arm and shoved her onto the couch. "I've never even so much as seen that case. What's so interesting in it, anyhow?"

She was nursing her wrist where his fingers had bruised the skin.

"That's my business," she snapped.

"The cops might make it theirs," he warned.

She looked up, quickly, the long curving lashes sheltering her eyes.

"You wouldn't turn me over to the police?"

His mouth was a twisted, bitter line. "Why not? The cops are trying to hand me twenty years. I may be a gentleman, Sugar, but I'm not enough of one to take a twenty-year rap, just to keep you out of the clutches of the law."

Her lips pouted sullenly. "Don't turn me in, please don't! I'll tell you anything I can."

He nodded. "Now you're talking sense. What was in the case?"

Her smile was unpleasant. "A million bucks worth of information."

"What kind of information?"

She shrugged. "All kinds. Tim Rude was a wise baby. He played both ends against the middle. Every time he picked up any information that might prove useful, he filed it. When he left for the Coast, he took the file along in the briefcase."

"And this information?"

She shrugged. "If I knew, I wouldn't be here."

"But you know enough to know that it was valuable. Come on, give."

She was sullen. "Okay. I do know some things. There was a dancer named Hunt, Paula Hunt—"

Zeiglar felt himself stiffening. "What about Paula Hunt?"

The blonde shrugged. "She and her husband used to operate a little joint in New York. The customers caught knockout drops when they had a roll. One of them died. The husband got four years."

"Where is he now?" asked Zeiglar.

The girl shook her head. "How would I know? That was in 'thirty-four."

"Ever hear of a man called Doll—Kewpie Doll?"

Her blue eyes froze and for a moment her lips were so stiff she couldn't speak. When she could, she said:

"I never heard the name."

"You're lying," Zeiglar told her coldly.

She was stubborn. "I tell you, I never heard the name!"

For an instant Zeiglar hesitated.

"If that's the way it is, you go downtown."

The words had no effect. She remained silent, and after a moment he said:

"Okay, Sugar. I've got to get some clothes on." He looked around. "Get into that closet."

She refused, without speaking. Zeiglar did not argue. He stooped, picked her up, and carried her kicking toward the closet. Shoving her inside, he turned the key, then went into the bathroom for a shower.

CHAPTER IV

BLACKMAIL'S UGLY HEAD



TEN minutes later, Cal Zeiglar slid into his coat and moved to the closet door.

"Want to talk now?" he asked through it.

There was no answer. He grinned sourly to himself, twisted the key and opened the door. The girl was not there.

He stared at the shoes on the floor, not believing his eyes, then he looked up at the small window. It was open. He stepped forward and looked out. The window was so small that she must have had to squeeze to get through. It was four stories to the ground, but only a short step away was the window of the closet of the neighboring apartment.

He leaned out far enough to learn that this too was open, then he slowly withdrew his head. No use going after her now. It was too late. The girl must have been plenty scared to have taken a chance of that kind—scared, or she had a lot of nerve, or both.

Zeiglar clapped on his hat, and left for the studio, to have it out with Braun, his boss.

Samuel Braun's voice was heavy with sarcasm when he greeted Zeiglar.

"So you decided to come to work, finally," he said. "You would think that you worked in a bank or something, the hours that you keep."

Cal Zeiglar looked around the studio chief's big office and one of the framed mottos caught his eye.

Early to bed, early to rise,
Makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise.

"Believe it or not," Zeiglar said, "I over-slept."

"Better you should have never waked up." Braun spread a paper across his desk so that the black headlines showed. "A fine thing. If worse publicity can be had, you will get it for us."

Zeiglar was getting sore. He didn't mind being bawled out by his small em-

player when they were alone. He knew the words which spilled from Braun's lips were a safety valve. The little man worked under tremendous pressure. But they were not alone. Paula Hunt was there, her dark eyes looking tired and dull. Martin Hyler, the director, was beside the window, and Ben South, the producer, paced back and forth like a caged lion.

South was a big man, his face red rather than tan, from much exposure to the sun. He looked like a polo player who had not been careful of his diet, but he had ability. Once he had been a leading producer on Broadway, before the picture business had offered him a steadier salary.

"A fine thing!" snapped South. "A picture all ready to shoot. A hundred thousand already spent, and the man who the whole thing is built around, is killed."

Zeiglar didn't answer, and after a moment, the producer went on:

"And that's not bad enough!" He had a sharp, accusing way of speaking. "He isn't content to get Rude killed by his blasted foolishness, but he has to drag Miss Hunt into it. So now we're out not one star, but two."

"I didn't—"

"You brought that detective dope to our table at the Granda, didn't you?" South's voice was rising. "You staged that riot, and sent Rude and Miss Hunt out together."

"Look!" said Zeiglar, and his voice was flat, and cold, and final. Its note of authority carried across the room to silence South. "I've had about enough. I was against the idea of bringing Tim Rude out here in the first place. You all thought it was a marvelous idea. Then Sam dreamed up the murder gag, and I had to chase the dope around town. I didn't want to bring him to your table at the Granda. He insisted. I didn't stage that riot, and I jolly well had nothing to do with his murder!"

"But the police—" Samuel Braun sounded meeker than Zeiglar had ever heard him.

"The devil with the cops!" said Zeiglar. "You all are overlooking one thing, just as the police are. Rude was a blackmail artist. He had a briefcase with him, and in that case there was a lot of dope on a lot of people. Someone tried

to gun him down on the jail steps. Doll and his killer, Blacksmith, moved in on him at the Granda, and someone knifed him at Miss Hunt's penthouse. If he hadn't been killed there, the chances are he would have been, later, somewhere else."

SAMUEL BRAUN covered his face with his short-fingered hands.

"Blackmailers, is it?" he moaned. "The thing gets worse as it goes along."

"You seem to know a lot about this blackmail, Zeiglar." Ben South sounded nasty. "Just how do you know so much?"

Zeiglar stared around the room before he answered. Everyone was watching him closely.

"I know," he said then, tightly, "because I had a visitor a little while ago. A blonde with ideas. She worked for Rude, she knew about the briefcase, and she thought I had it. She offered me a split in the racket, fifty-fifty if I'd throw in with her. I was almost tempted. It couldn't have been worse than trying to work for this madhouse."

They stared at him, and Ben South laughed sharply.

"What a story! You've been handling publicity too long, Zeiglar. You've got so you believe the lies you write."

"Paula Hunt doesn't think so." Zeiglar turned to face the girl. "Do you, Paula."

Her eyes looked dark against the whiteness of her face.

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"You weren't any too pleased to see Rude, were you?"

She stared at him. Her lips seemed stiff as she opened them as if to speak. Then she closed her mouth without making a sound.

"What is this?" Samuel Braun demanded. "What are you trying to tell, Cal? Certainly, the little girl did not kill this Tim Rude. Or did she?"

"I don't know," Zeiglar admitted. "All I know is that she and her husband used to run a clip joint in the East. When a man got plastered in their place, or maybe caught a mickey, he got tapped on the head and lost his bankroll."

Samuel Braun drew his breath sharply. He had all of Hollywood's fear of a clip joint.

"That's not true!" the girl said desperately.

Zeiglar raised his eyebrows. He didn't like this job. He had liked Paula Hunt better than anyone he had seen around the big picture lot for some time.

"That's what they tell me, Sister," he drawled. "Your husband went up for four years."

"Yes." It was a new voice that spoke, and Zeiglar swung around to face Martin Hyler, the director. "I did go up for four years, and we were working in a clip joint. Only it didn't belong to us. They used our names as a front, and when trouble came, I took the rap."

Braun moaned. "Another!" He looked helplessly around the room. "Next, someone will tell me that I rob banks or maybe steal pennies from blind people. Why is it that you never told me that Paula Hunt is your wife?"

"She isn't," said Hyler. "We weren't even in love with each other. We were a dance team, and to keep the men from bothering her all the time we went through a marriage ceremony that didn't mean a thing. But after I came out of prison, I met someone I loved, so Paula gave me a divorce. She's a swell kid, Zeiglar. Lay off of her. She didn't kill Rude."

"Did you?" Zeiglar stared at him, hard.

"I should have," said the director, between his teeth. "The rat was blackmailing me. But I didn't do it. I've got a wife and kid to think of."

"Fine," said Zeiglar. "And who owned this clip joint you and Paula worked in?"

"Kewpie Doll. They didn't call him Kewpie in those days."

"And weren't you sore, taking a rap that didn't belong to you?"

HYLER shook his head.

"I wasn't sore at Doll if that's what you mean. I should have had sense enough to know what was going on, but that was ten years ago. I was just twenty-two. I took the rap, and Doll took care of me. When I came out, there was five grand in my bank account. I used it to come West, broke into pictures as a dancer, got a chance to switch to direction, and here we are." His voice sounded tired, and his face had a strained look.

"And waited four years to give your ex-wife a break?" Zeiglar sounded as if he didn't believe it.

"She wouldn't take it before," said Hyler. "She wanted to come up by her own efforts. She did. I had nothing to do with bringing her to Hollywood, but once she got here, I asked for the chance to direct her picture."

"Which gets us no closer to finding the briefcase, or learning who killed Tim Rude."

Zeiglar glanced at his watch. It was almost five. It would be dark in half an hour. He walked to the desk and called the airlines office, asked for a friend of his.

When he got his connection he said:

"Look, Al. A blonde came in on the morning plane from Chicago. Check for me, will you, and find when she bought her ticket?"

"You're crazy," his friend said. "No blonde came in unless she was wearing a uniform. There were only Army officers on that plane."

Zeiglar hung up, slowly. Stella Alden had lied to him. She had not arrived by plane this morning. She might have been in town on the preceding evening. She might even have put the paper knife into Tim Rude's side. . . .

About an hour later when Cal Zeiglar walked into Kewpie Doll's office at the Granda, the dance-hall owner showed no surprise. From his attitude, sitting at his desk, he might have been waiting for the publicity man's arrival.

"Hello, sucker," Doll rumbled.

Zeiglar nodded and looked sideward at Blacksmith. The ferretlike gunman was standing with his back to the wall, his hands out of sight in his coat pockets.

"Tell Junior to scram," Zeiglar said to Doll. "I want to talk to you."

"Some day," said Blacksmith, "I'm going to put a bullet in your belly and watch you take your time dying."

He turned without waiting for orders and disappeared through the doorway.

Doll breathed noisily. "That isn't smart. Blacksmith has no sense of humor."

"He'd better have sense enough to keep out of my way." Zeiglar meant what he said. He lit a cigarette and sat down on the corner of Doll's desk. "So Tim Rude was blackmailing you?"

Not a muscle of Doll's battered face moved.

"So you found the case?"

"I didn't say that," Zeiglar was choosing his words with care. "But I do know a few things. I know that a well-thought-of movie director took a rap ten years ago, a rap that should have been yours."

"So what?" Doll was not concerned.

"So the cops have me ticketed for a killing, and I don't like it."

"I'm crying," said the dance-hall man, grinning broadly.

"You might be," Zeiglar told him, "if I turn up that case. But I'm not after you, Kewpie. I wish I hadn't butted in last night. If I'd known what I know now, I'd have stood aside and let your boys beat Tim Rude's ears off. Frankly, I need help. I'll not get any from the cops, or the studio. That's why I'm here."

DOLL had stopped laughing. His eyes got narrow as he thought about what Zeiglar had said.

"What do you want?" he finally asked.

Cal Zeiglar shrugged. "If I knew, I wouldn't be sitting here on the corner of this desk. Tell me what you know about Rude."

"That rat—"

"Everyone agrees on that. Who would want to kill him? What did he have on you?"

Doll laughed. "You must think I'm a sucker. Never mind what he had on me, but I'm not the only one on the Coast he was putting the bite on. He arranged that picture deal himself, remember that."

"With whom? Hyler?"

Doll nodded. "What do you think? Supposing you'd done time in prison, had come out, changed your name and worked yourself up in the picture business until you had a nice spot. Supposing you were married, had a kid, and a guy like Rude told you to make him a picture actor or else. What would you do?"

"Make him an actor," Zeiglar admitted.

"That's right," Doll agreed. "Then supposing the guy wanted something else—something you couldn't get him. What would you do then?"

"Kill him, maybe."

Doll shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. But there's a gal in this town who loved Hyler. She never said anything about it. She gave him a divorce when he wanted it, and she would have done anything else—anything—for him. Think that over."

Zeiglar was thinking it over when he left the dance-hall, and he didn't like his thoughts. Doll had been referring to Paula Hunt, of course. The whole thing seemed to point to her, unless Doll was guilty himself and trying to use the girl as a blind.

The press agent walked toward where he had parked his small, inexpensive car on a side street. The lights were none too good here and since the dimout had turned off every other one, they were worse.

He bent down in an effort to fit his key into the door lock, and the bullet went over his head and hit the center of the door glass. It rained down upon him in a thousand shattered fragments, powdering his shoulders with long, lancelike slivers.

Zeiglar dropped. The motion was purely instinctive. As he went down, he brought his gun out from the shoulder clip in one sweeping gesture, twisting on one knee to see where the shot had come from.

CHAPTER V

DOUBLE FRAME



ROW of single-storied buildings faced the street, their flat roofs hidden by a four-foot brick wall. Cal Zeiglar judged that the marksman had been behind this wall. He couldn't be certain, and it was so dark that the man might still be there and Zeiglar not be able to see him.

But by the same token, the darkness was a screen. He crawled carefully around the coupé and, using the line of parked cars to cover him, he made hurriedly for the Boulevard. There he flagged a cab and tumbled inside, giving his address. The coupé could stay where it was, even with four good tires. He didn't figure it worth as much to him as his life.

As the cab carried him toward his

apartment, he turned over in his mind the problem of who his attacker might have been.

Blacksmith would like nothing better than to put a bullet into Zeiglar's head. The man had had it in for the press agent for a long time, ever since the day Zeiglar had been responsible for Blacksmith's turn-down at the studio, when the gunman had had dreams of making a personal appearance in gangster pictures. It seemed hardly a motive for killing a man, but Blacksmith was the vengeful type.

With or without orders from Doll, the little gunman was a decided threat. But had it been Blacksmith who had shot? Zeiglar had no way of knowing.

He paused at the desk and, going into the phone booth, put in a long distance call for New York, giving his telephone number. Then he left the booth and walked to the automatic elevator. It carried him upward to his floor and he stepped out into the empty hallway. His key rattled a little as he thrust it into the lock.

What he needed, he was thinking, was a drink; perhaps two drinks. It wasn't every night someone took a shot at him.

But he did not get the drink at once, for the blonde had come back. She lay in the exact center of his living room, one dead hand clutching the leather handle of a briefcase. The briefcase flap was open, and one glance showed Zeiglar that it was empty.

He bent over and felt for her pulse, then he got a small mirror and held it before her lips. He had known she was dead, but he wanted to be sure.

There was only one mark on her. Someone had hit the side of her head, and hit hard. There was not a lot of blood, and her loose hair pretty well concealed what there was. It made Zeiglar a little sick to see her and he turned away.

Then he turned back and looked at the case. Its handle was fastened by two brass rings. Through one of these was a blue string with a part of a blue ticket attached. The case had evidently been checked at one of the bus stations.

He swore under his breath. Why hadn't he thought of that? The blonde had not been so dumb. Or had she known in the first place? Hardly. If she'd known, she wouldn't have come up

here, or maybe she would. She had got the case and come back. Why?

The ringing phone startled him. He stared at it, hesitating to answer, then remembered the call he had put in for New York. He crossed to the instrument and answered. It was his call.

He talked for almost ten minutes. When he hung up, his eyes were hard and bright, and thoughtful. He looked again at the girl, and his lips moved.

"Too bad you couldn't have stuck around for the showdown, Sister," he muttered.

She'd had courage. It had taken courage to step across from the closet window that morning, and Zeiglar admired courage, even put to wrong uses.

THE phone rang again, and when Zeiglar answered, Samuel Braun's voice said: "The cops have been looking for you again. They have changed the charge. It is now murder, and your bail is no longer good."

"Thanks."

Zeiglar meant it. He knew how much the little studio chief hated trouble. But Braun would not desert a friend, although he might gripe about the help he gave.

"That's not all," said Braun. "Come back to the studio if you can get here. Tonight we have got to decide to make the Paula Hunt picture or throw it in the ashcan."

"Better throw it in the ashcan. It smells to high heaven, anyway."

"Two pictures we cannot junk in one day," Braun moaned. "I wish I had been struck deaf the first time that I heard about Tim Rude. It would have been better for all of us if he never had lived."

"Who did suggest that you hire Rude?" asked Zeiglar.

"Who is it that has all the ideas around this studio?" Braun said, quickly. "Me, of course, even when they are bad ones. We are waiting for you. Get here quick."

Zeiglar hung up and turned around as someone knocked heavily on his door. He stared at the panel thoughtfully. It might be anyone, but he had a hunch. That knock sounded like the police.

He glanced at the girl's body. This would be swell. If Chandler had lacked evidence before, he didn't lack it now.

But what to do. There was no back entrance to the apartment.

Then he thought of the closet window. The blonde had used it, and he wasn't ready to admit that he had less courage than she'd had.

He ducked into the closet and locked the door from the inside. That would give him a little more time. And he needed it for, through the locked door, he could hear an entrance being forced to his apartment.

The window was small. It was a tough job to work his shoulders through it, but he managed somehow. Grasping the frame with one hand he reached across to the window of the other closet. It was still open, and in another minute he was in the next apartment.

It was empty. The tenant, a woman, apparently hadn't come home for the evening. He opened her front door a crack and peered out. The door of his own place was ajar and he could hear the voices of the police within, but he couldn't see them.

It was fifty feet to the rear stairs. He made it without an alarm being raised and ran quickly down the stairs to the alley entrance. From a corner drug store he called the Granda and got Kewpie Doll on the wire.

"I need your help," he said, and told Doll what had happened.

The dance-hall owner chuckled. "And why should I help you, my friend?"

"Because," said Zeiglar, "the man who killed the blonde got the contents of Tim Rude's briefcase. Rude apparently had something on you. So now the murderer has the same thing. I thought perhaps you'd like to get it back."

Doll swore under his breath. "You're right, chum. Just tell me who this guy is, and I'll take care of him for you."

"My way is better," said Zeiglar. "Meet me at the rear gate of the studio in half an hour, and bring a couple of men with you. Don't use the front entrance. The cops will probably be watching that."

He hung up, went out and got into a cab. . . .

SAMUEL BRAUN blinked when Zeiglar came into the big office, trailed by Doll and his two men.

"Is this a time to invite guests," Braun demanded.

"They aren't guests," Zeiglar said. "They're interested parties. Our pal Tim Rude was blackmailing them, too."

He looked around the room. The producer Ben South was smoking placidly. Paula Hunt and Martin Hyler were standing close together as if deriving comfort from the other's nearness.

"You people ought to know one another," Zeiglar said, addressing the girl. "You all contributed to Tim Rude's support."

Her face was expressionless.

"We haven't denied it," Martin Hyler said angrily, "but there's no need to turn this into a three-ring circus."

"I think there is," said Zeiglar. "Two people have been murdered, and the cops are going to tag me for both kills. I don't like that. I'm a busy man. I've got no time to attend a murder trial, even my own."

He removed the glasses he wore and blinked at them thoughtfully.

"Let's see if we can clear this up. First—" He glanced toward Blacksmith. The little gunman was standing behind Doll, never taking his eyes from Zeiglar's face. "You took a shot at me tonight, Blacksmith."

"Says you," Blacksmith shrugged.

"I do say so," Zeiglar told him, "and it's important, because at the time you were shooting at me from that store roof, our murderer was killing a blonde in my apartment. A clever killer, I'll admit, but even a killer can't be in two places at once."

"All right. I cracked at you, and I'm sorry I missed."

"You owe me for a door glass," Zeiglar said, and turned to look at Hyler. "You've got a wife and kid, and a soft job, and Rude was bleeding you white."

"But I didn't kill him." The director's voice was steady.

"No," Zeiglar admitted. "You didn't. I know, because I know who did."

He looked toward Paula Hunt. She was watching him as a bird might watch a hypnotic snake.

"You killed him, Ben," Zeiglar transferred his attention to Ben South. "You killed him because Tim Rude has been blackmailing you for ten years, ever since you had that argument with that chorine, back-stage at the old Parkview Theater in Chicago, and pushed her from the stairway. She broke her neck,

didn't she? Tim Rude was on the police force. Tim tabbed it as suicide."

South hadn't moved. "You're crazy!" he accused.

"No," said Zeiglar. "I knew in the beginning that Rude had blackmailed his way to the Coast. It was my job to find out who had suggested to Braun the idea of hiring him. Sam took the credit himself. He honestly believed he had thought up the whole idea for the picture. But you forgot, the original story ideas in this studio are filed in envelopes and turned over to my office. That's for the writer's protection, and I found the idea of making a picture with Tim Rude credited to you.

"So I called your agent in New York. He didn't know what I was after. I told him that I wanted to know if you'd ever been in trouble in Chicago. He said no, and then he remembered about the girl who had killed herself by jumping from the dressing-room stairway."

"Nuts!" snapped South. "You can't prove anything."

"I'm not going to try," said Zeiglar. "I'm not a cop. I'm going to turn you over to Doll and his merry men. There was some dope about Doll in that briefcase. I don't know what it was, and I don't care. He'll know how to handle you. I think he'll get a confession, and if you're dead by the time the cops arrive—"

"You can't do that!" shouted the producer. "It isn't human! It isn't—"

ZEIGLAR'S voice was hard.

"I don't care anything about Tim Rude. He got what he deserved. So did his blond stooge. But you killed Rude in Paula Hunt's apartment. You planted that publicity story on my desk, and you

killed the girl in my apartment. You were busy putting us behind the eight-ball whenever you could, pal, so take a shot of it yourself and see how it feels. He's yours, Doll."

The dance-hall owner took a step forward, but it was only a step. For Ben South fired through the pocket of his sport coat, the bullet striking Doll directly in the chest.

The dance-hall man went down as Zeiglar spun about, jerking at his own gun. But he never had a chance to use it, for Blacksmith had fired twice, the heavy slugs from his .45 knocking South out of his chair. Then he turned, and winked at Zeiglar.

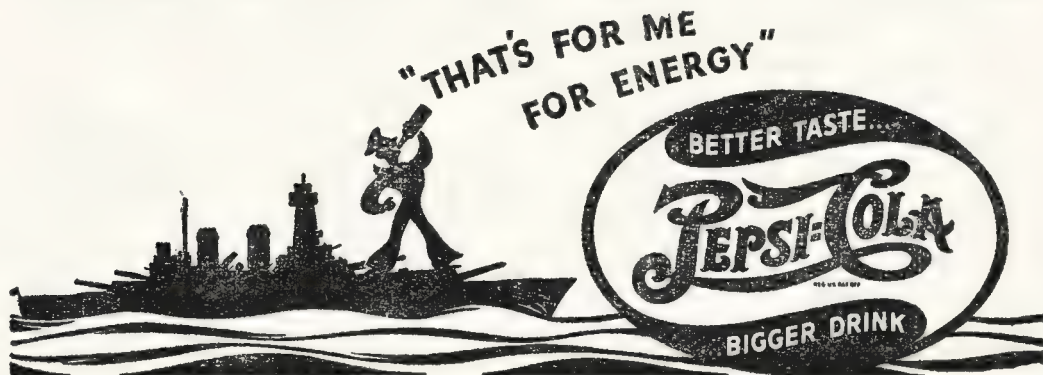
"Sorry, pal. I wish it had been you. I gotta go before the cops come." He jumped toward the door and was gone.

Zeiglar walked over and looked at the fallen men. They were both dead. Then he looked at his chief, expecting to find Braun hiding behind his desk. Instead, the little executive was hopping up and down in excitement.

"I've got it!" he told them. "I've got it! The story which we will make instead of the one about Rude. We will shoot what happened here, a man who by blackmail tries to be an actor. Paula will play in it, and Martin, you will direct. I've even a title. This is the greatest yet. We will call the picture, 'You've Got to Have Homicide!' Tell me, Cal! Am I stupendous, or am I stupendous?"

"You are," said Zeiglar, meeting Paula Hunt's dark eyes.

At least, it would give her a part, he was thinking. At least she wouldn't go back to New York. It might, he decided, be fun to show her Hollywood. It might be fun to have her around the lot.





Sam leaped to his feet. "Listen!" he snapped. "That girl isn't mixed up in murder!"

A SIMPLE CASE OF MURDER

By JAMES DONNELLY

There's plenty of work ahead for trouble-shooter Sam Chase when the law issues a pick-up order for his girl!

IT WAS quiet in the yard superintendent's office. The strident noise of the shipyard assembly platforms, the chippers' hammers, the tumult of noise involved in building the huge tankers, seemed far away.

Mark Hale, the iron-haired superintendent, looked worried. He motioned for Sam Chase to sit down.

Chase grinned and took a chair where he could look over the third man in the room; a large, hulking man who wore the unmistakable garb of a welder.

"Chase," Hale said, "this is Tom Delaney. He's a leadman down at Hull Nine."

The superintendent glanced at the leadman.

"Sam Chase was a trouble-shooter for

me before we got into ship building," he explained. "I wish you'd tell him what happened."

Delaney nodded at Chase and ran a heavy hand over his chin. He appeared to be nervous.

"One of my men was killed last night. It wasn't an accident."

Chase's eyebrows went up. He was attentive and serious now—a lean, young man with level eyes and a weather-tanned face.

"Go on," he said.

For a second his eyes flicked to the fourth person in the room. Alice Downey, Hale's secretary, was taking down the conversation in shorthand at a small desk in the corner of the room.

She glanced up and her eyes held

Chase's. He saw something close to fright in them. A far thing from the look that had been in them the night before when he had kissed her good-night.

Delaney was speaking again and Alice Downey looked back at her notebook. The diamond on her left hand flashed as she turned a page. The diamond had accompanied the kiss. It gave Chase a good feeling.

"A burner found Kassen at about four this morning," Delaney said. "Kassen was down in tank four, laying next to the vertical keel. We thought he'd passed out from fumes and the crane lowered a platform and we took him out."

The welder stopped to light a cigarette. His hands trembled a little.

"Just before we went off shift," he continued, "a safety man came rushing up. He wanted to know more about Kassen. He hadn't passed out from fumes."

Chase glanced at Hale to catch an expression on the superintendent's face that might explain some of this. Hale was watching Delaney without expression, his lips tight.

"What killed him?" Chase asked.

The welder leadman crushed out his half-smoked cigarette.

"Someone burned a hole through his chest with a blow torch," he said.

IN THE corner of the room, Alice Downey dropped her pencil. Chase looked at her. Color had drained from her cheeks and she was biting her lips.

Chase glanced at Hale. "The cops are on this, Chief?" he asked.

Hale nodded. "Lieutenant Gleason wants to see you in a few moments. He's out in the yard now. He's already questioned Delaney. Alice took a transcript of it so you can read over what's been said."

"You mean there's more to it than Delaney's told me?"

"Earlier in the night, Kassen had a scrap with the burner who found him," Hale said briefly.

"Who was the burner?"

"Carl Lindsey," Delaney supplied.

Chase felt his muscles tighten. His look went to the corner of the room again.

Alice Downey stared at him, her eyes large. Suddenly she stood.

"Mr. Hale," she said in a tense voice.

"I should have told you before. I shouldn't have taken this transcript for you. You don't understand that. . . ." She faltered.

Hale looked at her in surprise.

"Understand what, Alice?"

"Carl Lindsey is my step-brother. You didn't know. . . ."

Hale was on his feet.

"Good heavens, girl! Why didn't you tell me?"

Chase was at her side, his arm about her. Delaney stared at the girl, obviously embarrassed.

Chase spoke quietly to Hale.

"Have they questioned Lindsey yet?"

"We haven't been able to find him. The police already have been at his home. He wasn't there. Evidently he left the yard when the shift was in, but no one knows where he is."

"He didn't do it!" Alice Downey protested. Her voice held a tremble. "He's just a kid. He wouldn't kill a man!"

Delaney continued to stare at the girl.

"But you must be . . ." the welder stuttered and hesitated. "You must be the girl they were fighting about!"

Chase felt the girl's body tighten beneath his arm. He tried to understand what Delaney meant. Why would a welder and Alice's kid step-brother fight over her? This didn't make sense.

"Listen," he said, "will someone tell me what the score is?"

Hale moistened his lips and worry etched deeper lines in his face. Silently he picked up several sheets of paper with typing on them.

"Alice had time to transcribe these before you came," he said. "You'd better glance over them."

Alice began to sob. Automatically, Chase took the papers and glanced at the typed words that Hale indicated with a heavy finger:

Lieutenant Gleason: What did they fight about?

Tom Delaney: A girl. Lindsey's sister. I heard it.

Lieutenant Gleason: Heard what?

Tom Delaney: Lindsey said, "Where did you have my sister until seven o'clock in the morning?"

Lieutenant Gleason: I thought he worked graveyard.

Tom Delaney: It was their day off.

Lieutenant Gleason: What happened then?

Tom Delaney: Kassen laughed and said something. Lindsey hit him. Kassen rode the punch and knocked Lindsey down. Then I broke it up.

Sam Chase's mind flashed over the week.

Lindsey had been off Tuesday morning. This was Thursday. Monday night Alice had told him that she had a date with some girl friends. That was the night and early morning that Lindsey and Kassen had been off.

HE TRIED to find an answer. From the confusion he singled out something that had bothered him from the start.

"Why didn't you see the chest wound?" he asked Delaney.

The question would cover his confusion, the tumult of thoughts about Alice and what the transcription had told.

"It was under his leather welder's coat," Delaney said. "Whoever did it, pulled his coat back and covered the hole again."

"And Lindsey found him?"

"That's right. He yelled up in a quiet lull when the chippers weren't working. He stayed down until the crane dropped the platform."

Chase took a deep breath.

"If you don't mind, Chief, I'd like to take Alice home."

"Certainly." Hale nodded. He seemed relieved to have someone take charge of the situation.

"I'll get in touch with you and see Gleason later," Sam added.

"I wanted you to handle our end of it," Hale said.

Chase nodded curtly.

Alice Downey had stopped sobbing. She used a wisp of handkerchief on her wet cheeks and eyes.

"Sam," she said quietly, "if you'd rather not . . ."

"I want to talk with you," he said briefly.

Silently they left the administration building and walked toward the office parking lot where Sam kept his car. A few yards from the lot, Delaney overtook them.

"Look, Miss," he blurted, "I didn't know you were Lindsey's step-sister. I didn't want to get anyone in bad with the cops."

"It's all right," she smiled wearily. "They'd have found out."

Delaney looked relieved.

"I guess my wife's waiting for me," he said. "I'd better hurry."

"Get in," Chase told him. "I'll drive you down to the other lot."

They drove through the gates and past guards to the outer lot. Delaney indicated a car with a nod.

A girl, blond and younger than Delaney, was in the car. She frowned impatiently.

"What kept you?" she demanded as Chase stopped and Delaney got out of the car.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said. "Something happened."

He thanked Chase for the ride.

Sam sped toward the exit road, his lips tight, his eyes fastened to the road. Beside him, Alice Downey looked away. Tears were in her eyes. He saw them as he felt her hand press his arm a few seconds later.

"Here, Sam," she said quietly.

He looked down. She was handing the diamond ring to him.

"Take it," she said. "This ends things for us."

He shook his head. "I want the story," he insisted.

"There isn't a story," she said. "I was out with him until seven that morning. Carl was right. That's all there is to it."

"You think Carl killed Kassen?"

"No!"

Chase was silent. Finally he spoke again.

"I want the whole story."

"There simply isn't one, Sam. You already know it."

He felt her slip the ring into his pocket. He let her do it. All of that could be handled later. Now he had to get to the bottom of this thing that had happened to them.

At her home, Mary, Alice's younger sister, was leaving the house. She looked frightened and excited.

"Alice! The police were here about Carl. Something happened at the shipyard last night and he hasn't come home!"

"I know," Alice said.

THE girl stared at them with a perplexed frown.

"I—I guess I'd better go. I'll be glad when I'm graduated this year. I feel so—so useless when Carl may be in trouble and I have to go off to school. . . ."

"You have to finish high school," Alice

remonstrated automatically. "Is Dad home?"

Mary shook her head. "He left for work early this morning."

They watched her walk hurriedly down the street.

Alice smiled bitterly. "I'm glad Mother isn't here," she said. "I'm afraid her heart would be broken before it's all over."

"What do you mean?" Sam demanded.

Alice shook her head and got out of the car.

"Thanks, Sam," she whispered. "Thanks for everything!"

Tears blotted her voice as she turned and ran toward the house.

He watched the door close after her and thoughtfully drove back toward the shipyard.

Lieutenant Gleason was a tall, slender man in middle age. He looked more like a prosperous salesman than a detective as he sat at Hale's desk and talked in a quiet voice with the superintendent and Sam Chase.

"We thought at first that we might be running into some sabotage," he said. "But that's out. This is a simple case of murder. Young Lindsey has a reputation for being hot-tempered. They'd had the fight early in the night. We think that they met in the hull tank again. No one else was working in the tank, so we don't know, but it's probably what happened. Lindsey probably knocked him told and used the torch. There's a lump on Kassen's chin."

"Have you found Lindsey yet?" Hale asked.

The detective shook his head.

Sam lit a cigarette.

"You may be right," he admitted, "but I know young Lindsey. I don't think he could kill a man that way."

Gleason shrugged.

"You can't tell about men," he philosophized. "When you've been a cop as long as I have, you realize that anything can happen."

"Have you any definite clues?" Sam asked.

"Lindsey was working in that tank. It was his torch."

"Anything else?"

Gleason was thoughtful.

"We'd like a look at Lindsey's leather welding coat."

"Why?" Hale asked, puzzled.

"We found leather under Kassen's fingernails. He fought and scratched whoever killed him. There should be marks on the leather coat the man wore."

The telephone rang sharply. Hale answered it and silently handed the instrument to Gleason. Gleason spoke and then listened for several moments. He was thoughtful when he replaced the instrument in its cradle.

"The early newspaper editions are on the street," he said. "One carries a picture of Kassen. It brought unexpected results."

A feeling of premonition swept over Sam. Somehow, he knew there was trouble now for Alice Downey.

"What kind of results?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"A service station attendant recognized Kassen as the man who held up the station Sunday night and shot one of the attendants. You probably read about it in the papers."

Sam fingered the diamond ring in his coat pocket and tried to absorb what Gleason had told him. It meant that Alice had been with Kassen when the murder was committed. An accomplice to murder!

Gleason was using the telephone again.

"Pick up Alice Downey," he snapped into the mouthpiece. "Hold her in connection with that gas-station murder."

SAM leaped to his feet and leaned closer to Gleason.

"Listen," he snapped. "You're wrong about that. She wouldn't..."

Gleason looked at him and a flash of sympathy crossed his eyes.

"She was your girl. Take it easy, son. The law doesn't respect love."

"Was my girl?" Sam barked. "She still is. Do you get that? She still is!"

"Calm down," Hale said gently. Gleason's right, Sam."

Sam Chase got up abruptly and slammed out of the office. He stopped at a telephone in another office and dialed Alice Downey's number. He waited several moments, but no one answered.

His eyes were thoughtful as he hung up.

"She's probably contacted Carl," he muttered. "If they stay out of sight, maybe there's still a chance..."

A new thought struck him. Everything added up to one sensible answer. Maybe Carl *had* killed Kassen. Gleason was right. The kid was hot-headed. If he knew about the mess that Kassen had got Alice into. . . .

Only Sam Chase couldn't believe that Alice had been with Kassen that night. "I've got to know the truth about this," he thought. "One way or the other. And whatever else there is, one thing is sure: Alice is facing a murder rap if they want to be tough. She can be called an accomplice. She admitted that she was with Kassen."

His jawline tightened as he left the building.

He knew that he'd find no peace until he knew the whole story. If she were innocent, maybe he could save her—and Carl. If not—well, maybe he was a sap, but when a guy is in love he has to fight for the girl. No matter what happens, he has to do that!

The graveyard shift had been at work an hour. The fact that a murder had been committed the night before had no visible effect upon the activity of men and women at work.

Welders' arcs flashed in the night, burners' torches made small cascades of molten steel. Ships were being built, and ten thousand workers had little time to think of murder.

For half an hour Sam Chase had been at the shipways where the murder hull was under construction.

His eyes were restless as they looked over workers, as he went down into tanks, over bulkheads, into every corner of the ship.

On his forehead he wore welders' glasses that he slipped over his eyes when he stared at a welder. He couldn't afford a "flash" from an arc. He might need his eyes a great deal soon and a flash could disable them for days.

Once he paused as he saw a woman, in welder's garb, climb a ladder. She looked like Alice from the side and it brought a poignant anxiety into his mind.

He wondered where Alice was. If the police search, that had become intense when it was discovered that she was not at home, had found her.

Carl Lindsey, welder, wanted for murder. Alice Downey, his step-sister, wanted in connection with another murder. The affair was tied into a series of

links and the papers were splashing headlines that equalled war news.

Sam straddled a stiffener and went toward the ladder the woman had ascended. A man hurried past him and climbed rapidly. Sam recognized Delaney, the welder leadman.

Chase paused as a welder near him struck an arc. Anxiously he scrutinized the welder's leather coat. There were no even, parallel marks that a man's scratching fingernails could have made on the leather.

He went on up the ladder. The din of a dozen air chipping hammers filled his ears. The fumes from welding crept into his nostrils and made them raw.

He hurried and was glad to step into the cool night air.

WORK was concentrated on the bow of the ship over the huge tanks that were aligned to form the ship. There was little work at the stern, but a stray welder or two might be there, Sam decided.

He slipped through a door cut in a steel section of the superstructure and started for the stern.

Suddenly he stopped.

Even above the racket of chippers' hammers, he heard a woman scream.

No one else seemed to have heard it. Workers on the other side of the superstructure continued their noise.

Chase ran forward, trying to see into the night beyond the glare of floodlights. The woman screamed again.

Then he saw her. It was the woman welder he had seen climbing the ladder. She was backed against a guard rope at a far corner of the partially completed deck. Behind her was a sixty-foot drop to the steel-cluttered building ways.

A man approached her, hunched over a trifle, his arms swinging menacingly.

In the glare from lights, Sam could see her face. It was Alice Downey, her eyes wide with fright, her body tensed as if she expected to spring forward.

The man approaching her was Delaney.

Chase swore as he lunged.

Alice Downey's change of expression, as she saw him, warned Delaney. The large welder whirled and met Chase's attack. His huge fists lashed out.

Chase tried to avoid them. He had lunged too heavily. Something cracked

against his jaw and he skidded over the steel.

He tried to get up. A booted foot crashed into his side.

For seconds he lay doubled up, his lungs in anguish as he tried to get his breath. The boot thudded into him again.

Then Delaney was gone.

Chase staggered to his feet.

Alice was struggling wildly against the welder. Steadily he forced her against the rope. Her back arched over it.

Delaney tore her grasping hands away from his arms. One hand clamped over her wrists. His shoulders hunched.

Chase staggered toward the couple. Something was wrong with his legs. They were loose. His eyes blurred. He forced himself to move, dragging deep gulps of air into his lungs.

The cool air cleared his mind a little.

He knew that he couldn't make it. There was too far to go before Delaney would force the girl over the rope. Force her into the terrifying fall to steel and timbers below—to death.

Chase's foot kicked something small and heavy. Automatically he looked down at the chipper's chisel on the deck. It was a solid, short length of steel.

He picked it up and threw it with all the strength he could summon.

It flashed over the few yards to the couple and struck the welder just above the neck-line of his leather coat.

He slumped and Alice Downey threw herself against his weight, sprawling over him as the man fell back to the deck.

Then Sam Chase was spraddled over him, his fists slashing against the man's jaw.

"Stop! Please, Sam! He's unconscious!"

Alice's words came through the daze in his mind. He felt his muscles relax and after a moment the redness left his eyes and he was looking into her face.

"What. . ."

"Get the police, Sam. Please call the police!" she interrupted.

Mechanically she pointed down at the welder as she spoke.

Sam Chase looked at the large man and saw what she meant.

Three narrow scratches streaked down across the face of the man's

leather coat. A man's clawing fingernails could do that.

CHASE stared at the girl.

"You knew?" he asked tensely.

Carl noticed leather under Kassen's fingernails as he waited for them to get him out. He wondered about it. Then when he tried to move Kassen to get him into the platform they lowered, the coat fell back and he saw what had happened. He'd left the tank for half an hour a little before. He realized that someone had murdered Kassen while he was gone.

But why didn't he. . .

Why didn't he report it? Because he was frightened. He knew everyone would think he had done it. They'd had the fight. He lost his head and fastened the coat over the wound. He left the yard as soon as he could.

"You saw him today?"

"Yes. He called me. I met him downtown. While we talked, the papers came out with Kassen's picture. Then a little while later there was a news flash over the radio in the cafe where we were. Kassen had been recognized as the murderer of that gas station attendant."

She hesitated and then continued:

"We talked about the leather under the fingernails and Carl thought of the scratches that must be on someone's coat. Too many men know him out here—he couldn't come out. I bought this outfit. My badge let me in."

"You spotted the scratches on Delaney's coat?"

She nodded. "But he's smart. He recognized me and saw what I was staring at. He realized what had happened and came after me."

She shuddered.

"He admitted it as he forced me against the rope. He said I'd never tell anyone. He meant to kill me."

Sam kept his eyes upon her face.

"Then you were with Kassen that night? The night of the murder—the gas station murder? Carl knew it all along?"

Her eyes wavered.

"He knew that—that. . ."

Suddenly Sam realized what she was concealing.

"He knew that *Mary* had been with Kassen!" he exclaimed. "You're trying to take the brunt of this to protect her!"

"She's just a kid, Sam!" Alice said in an outburst of defense.

Sam smiled gently.

"That's right, honey. The cops will realize that, too."

"I don't know where she met Kassen. She tried to get away from him that night. He wouldn't let her. She came home scared to death, but she wouldn't tell us what happened. She was frightened this morning, but tried to hide it from you. She didn't know what had happened."

"I think the district attorney will be lenient if she tells a straight story. Kassen already has paid the penalty for that murder, even if Mary unwillingly was with him. . . ."

He stared down at Delaney again.

"There's only one thing," he said.

"Why did Delaney kill Kassen?"

Alice clutched his arm.

"Will the scratches on his coat clear Carl?"

"They'll convict Delaney. Chemists can analyze the leather and identify it as the same as they found under Kas-

sen's fingernails. Why did he kill Kassen?"

"Carl knows that. Kassen was playing around with Delaney's wife. Kassen laid off the night before he took Mary out and . . ."

Abruptly Sam's eyes narrowed.

"Wait!" he snapped. "That was the night Kassen killed the gas station attendant! Sunday night! We've all been wrong! Even Gleason! Mary was out with him *Monday* night."

"Then Mary is in the clear!"

"That's right," Sam Chase grinned. "But Delaney isn't. You get a guard and then call the cops. We have business at Headquarters!"

Alice Downey managed a smile through the tears in her eyes. She turned and hurried toward the nearest stairway tower to the shipway below.

"Just a minute!" Sam called after her. "You're forgetting something!"

She turned and caught the glint of the diamond ring in his hand.

"Later!" she called softly. "I don't like to be kissed in a hurry!"

COMING NEXT MONTH

Doctor Martin Marshall, geologist, wages scientific battle against Montana killers in THE ROCKS READ DEATH, a gripping mystery novelet by ARTHUR J. BURKS—packed with thrills and suspense!

DON'T BE CHEEKY, MISTER!

WHY NOT? I SHAVE WITH STAR BLADES!

6NX PROCESS
STAR
DOUBLE EDGE

4 for 10¢

STAR
SINGLE EDGE

"Tough luck for you, baby," Al said. "Hand over that dough!"



THE HOSTAGE

By BENTON BRADEN

The farmer's daughter was crazy—like a fox—and she matched wits with a pair of slick city crooks!

THE two men who climbed through the wire fence and crossed the farmyard were shivering. A bitter chill had settled over the countryside as darkness had come. A few flakes of snow were beginning to fall. The two men did

not go directly to the front door of the farmhouse.

Instead they went to the north side of the house and crouched by a window. One of the men was tall, thin-lipped, and had a bad scar on the right side of his face. The other was not so

short, but his thick shoulders and slouching gait made him seem so. They moved their faces close to the window pane and stared.

They were looking into the comfortable parlor of the farmhouse. A man of middle age was sitting in a rocking chair, reading a newspaper. At his right a gray-haired woman, obviously his wife, sat knitting. Across the room, nearer the front door, sat a young woman of perhaps twenty. She was neatly dressed, pretty. A manicure set rested on her knees as she did her nails.

"Cripes!" the shorter man muttered. "I'm freezin'. Let's get in there and soak up some of that heat."

"Okay, Nick," the tall man assented. "We'll go in. We won't show our hand at first. We'll just look these hicks over. Maybe I can get an idea."

They moved along the side of the house till they came to the low, rail-less front porch. They tiptoed along the porch to the front door and the tall man rapped lightly on the wood with his knuckles. The door opened in a matter of seconds. It was the girl who had opened it. The smile left her face. She seemed disappointed.

The tall man took a step forward as Nick pushed him a little. "We're cold, lady," he said. "We'd like to come in for a few minutes and get warm."

"Come right in," she said, as she opened the door wider. "You should be wearing overcoats on a night like this."

"We didn't expect to be caught out after dark," the tall man said, as he went quickly to the coal heater across the room and held out his hands to the fire. "Our car broke down on us."

"Take those two chairs there and get right up by the fire," the gray-haired lady said heartily. "You must be half frozen. Wouldn't you like to have me make you some hot coffee?"

"No." It was Nick who answered so quickly. "We just want to get warm for a minute. We got to hurry on back

and get our car fixed up."

The farmer had been giving them a silent appraisal. "Guess you're strangers hereabouts," he drawled. "My name is Parker. Joe Parker. This is my wife and daughter. Where did you leave your car?"

THE tall man hesitated a moment, then opened his lips and started to answer. But he didn't speak. It was the radio that halted him. It had been going all the time, playing soft music. Now the music was suddenly cut off and was succeeded by a sharp voice.

"Attention! All officers! The two men who attempted to hold up the First State Bank of Corville this afternoon were sighted an hour ago, speeding through Rangeton. They were apparently heading for Stone City. Officers in that vicinity, watch all roads. The bandits are in a 1939 Chevrolet sedan. Numerals on license plate indistinguishable. Sedan dark blue. All officers should be prepared for trouble if they stop these men. They shot and wounded the cashier of the Corville bank when he thwarted the robbery. One of these men is tall and has a deep scar on his right cheek. The other is short and stocky. Use caution! These men are desperate! I will repeat this announcement."

Nick scowled and whipped a gun into his hand as the words were repeated. The music resumed. "That makes it a little different, Al," he said harshly. "That radio gave us a quick introduction. There ain't no use stallin'. These hicks will tip the cops that we're afoot if we give 'em a chance."

"We won't give them any chance!" Al snapped. "You let me figure this out, Nick. We're in a spot. We can't get anywhere without a car. A car and some dough. We got to get hold of some dough somewhere and then hole up."

Joe Parker leaned forward, his face grim and stern. "You admit—that you—"

Al laughed. "Why, sure, we admit it, farmer. We took a crack at that Corville bank this afternoon. It was a punk set-up. But we were broke and had to have some quick dough and took a chance. The cashier got tough and dived for a gun. We let him have it, but we had to blow before we could get our hands on any dough. Then we ran out of gas. The cops will be scouring the country when they find that ditched car. I might as well put it straight to you, farmer. You dig us up fifty bucks and we'll ramble on and take our chance. You got fifty dollars in the house?"

Parker shook his head. "We never keep any cash around the house," he said. "I always go to the bank and get what I need when we go to town, to Corbin Corners, where we trade. I think I've got about a dollar and a quarter in my wallet. Ma never carries money except when we're in town. I don't suppose," he turned to his daughter, "that you have much in your purse, do you, Alice?"

"I think I have eighty-five cents in my purse. It's on the table in the corner."

"Gimme that wallet of yours," Nick demanded of Parker. Parker reached in his hip pocket, handed the wallet over to Nick. Nick went to the table and opened the purse that lay there. He counted the take.

"Two bucks and fifteen cents," he sneered. "You people ought to be careful, carryin' around large sums of mazuma like that. Somebody might rob you some time." He dropped the change in his pocket. "What we gonna do now, Al?"

Al's black eyes seemed to be considering the problem. "There ain't but one thing we can do, Nick," he finally decided. "We'd freeze tryin' to make it across country tonight. Even if we hijacked us a car we wouldn't have enough dough to get us anywhere. So we'll stay right here—where it's nice and warm and we can get some of this

'good country cookin'.'

"The cops'll be scourin' the hills when they find that car," Nick objected. "They'll probably check with every farmer for miles around here. They'll tumble that something is wrong if they come here. And these people will squawk the first chance they get."

"They won't get any first chance, Nick."

"What d'yuh mean?"

"You know that newspaper you was reading yesterday, tellin' about how those Nazis take hostages and then shoot 'em if anything goes wrong? Well, we'll just use that same idea. We'll take us a hostage."

AL TURNED and grinned at Alice Parker.

"You're it, baby," he said. "You're going to be the hostage. If anybody tries to pull a fast one on us it will be just too bad for you. As long as everything goes right you're safe."

"You mean, we're gonna stay here a while?" Nick asked.

"Sure."

"How long?"

"Who knows?" Al shrugged. "As long as it's necessary. Till the heat is off. The more I think about it the better it looks. Why, we can stick here for a week or a month if it's necessary. We can let the old man and old lady go about their business and do their usual chores. With the understanding that if they let out a peep to anyone about us being here—the girl gets hers—quick."

Nick began to grin, too.

"That sounds good to me, Al," he admitted. "We get a warm place to stay and plenty to eat. We can even make the old man go into town and get us some dough when we get ready to blow. All we got to do is see that the girl never gets out of the sight of one of us. They'll behave."

"Yes, we'll behave." It was Alice Parker who spoke. She looked stead-

ily into Al's black eyes. "I know that my father and mother would keep you here for a year rather than have anything happen to me. But there's one thing you couldn't know. So your plan won't work."

"Why not?" Al demanded darkly.

"I am going to be married tomorrow," she replied. "I'm going to be married right in this house—in this room."

"You can guess again," Al barked. "You can put the wedding off."

"I don't think so," she countered. "You see, the invitations were sent more than a week ago. We couldn't get in touch with some of the guests if we tried. They'll be driving—from a distance. There will be fifty or sixty guests. It's too late to try to put it off."

"I think you're bluffing, baby," Al said, a threat in his voice. "I don't believe you're going to be married at all. I think it's just a dodge to get us out of here. I don't see any signs of a wedding. I don't see any gifts."

"This is a country wedding," she told him. "Here, it's the custom of the guests to bring the gifts with them when they come to the wedding. Mother, I guess you'll have to show them my wedding gown—and the bell. Will you get them and bring them in here? So they can see I'm telling the truth."

Mrs. Parker rose and went to the door that led into a rear hall. "No funny stuff, lady," Al warned. "Remember what will happen to your daughter if you don't come back."

But Mrs. Parker returned in about two minutes. In her left hand she held a big silver bell with white satin ribbons attached to it. Over her right arm was a long white dress with a trailing bridal veil. There was nothing phony about that dress. Even Al and Nick could see that it was a wedding dress. They frowned hard as they stared.

"Besides that," Alice Parker said

evenly, "it happens that the man I am going to marry will be here in about thirty minutes. I'm afraid," she smiled just a little, "that I'd have a difficult time convincing him that the wedding should be postponed."

"Your Romeo is comin' here tonight!" Al exclaimed, mild alarm in his tone.

"That's it," Alice nodded. "I suppose you'll have to hold him as a hostage, too."

"No, we won't," Al denied. "We'll just sit in a back room with your mother while he's here. One of us can stand back in the hall and hear what you say. You make a crack to him about us bein' here and your mother will get it. You get rid of the guy just as soon as you can. You can tell him you got to go to bed early because it'll be a hard day for you tomorrow. Nick and I can figure out what we'll do tomorrow later. You watch your step, sister. Don't you let this goof of yours guess that anything is wrong. Nick and me are going to stay here all night. We're both worn out and we got to have some rest."

YOUNG William Blanding was very light-hearted as he parked his car in front of the Parker farmhouse. He was a little nervous, too. It was his first date with Alice Corbin. He had met her only the Saturday night before.

Bill knew, at the first moment of their meeting, that he had met the girl he wanted to marry. But he couldn't expect her to have exactly the same reaction. He wasn't going to rush her too much at first. But he knew he'd propose to her the first time she gave him the slightest encouragement.

Bill was a newcomer to Corbin Corners, the little town eight miles from the Parker place. His Uncle George Blanding owned a big hardware store there and had sent for Bill and taken him in with the understanding that

he would be given a partnership if everything went right. Now, after three months, everything looked all right.

Bill braced himself as he stepped on the front porch and knocked on the door. He straightened his tie. He wanted to make a good impression. It would be a terrible blow to him if Alice Parker didn't happen to like him, really like him. His whole future life might depend on what happened in the next hour or two.

The door opened. Alice Parker stood before him. He gulped. Alice was even more lovely than he had remembered. She wasn't smiling, though. Her eyes were big and round and there was a queer expression on her face.

Bill opened his mouth, but before he could say a word Alice Parker threw her arms about his neck. "Bill!" she cried. "Isn't it wonderful! Just think—by this time tomorrow we'll be married!"

Bill's jaw dropped. But that wasn't all.

Then she kissed him. It was a long and hard kiss. When she took her lips away from his he was dizzy—and speechless. But Alice did the talking, anyway.

"Come in, Bill," she said. "We'll freeze to death here in the doorway. I could hardly wait for you to get here. Mother and I have been working hard all day. Everything's about ready. My wedding dress was finished this afternoon. I'd let you see it, but you know it's bad luck for a groom to see a wedding dress until the bride appears in it for the wedding ceremony." Her voice was a little shrill and the hand she laid on his was trembling.

All Bill Blanding could do was to gulp and blink as she got him inside and closed the door. She kissed him again then and steered him across the room to the brightly upholstered sofa that sat in the corner. He was men-

tally paralyzed. Here he had figured that it would be weeks before he would dare propose and now she was embracing him, kissing him, and talking about a wedding that was slated for the morrow.

His first wild thought was that this lovely girl he had fallen in love with was an outright lunatic. Plain crazy! He'd have to humor her until he got her calmed down. He knew it was dangerous to argue with persons who have hallucinations. He was trying hard to collect his wits as they sat down on the sofa.

"You can't stay long, Bill," she chattered on. "I've worked so hard I'm really worn out and I want to rest so I can look my best tomorrow. Mother was exhausted and went on to bed. But I don't know whether I'll be able to sleep a wink or not. I'm so excited."

AS SHE talked on feverishly Bill began to notice certain things. Alice's face had a strained rather than the happy expression of a bride. She wasn't giving him a chance to get in a word. She had hold of his right hand with her left and her hand kept pressing his insistently and jerkily as though she were trying to telegraph a message. Yes, her imploring eyes were trying to put over a message to him, too. There was something wrong here. He couldn't begin to guess what it was.

He smiled at her as he interrupted her. "You're sure, Alice," he asked experimentally, "that nothing has been overlooked? That everything is set? We don't want to overlook any details."

He saw her eyes close as she gave a small sigh of thankful relief. "I'm sure nothing has been overlooked, Bill," she said. "We'll decorate this corner of the room in the morning. That's all that's left to do. I suppose the guests will start arriving about three. You'd better not come out until that time. That will give us an

hour before the wedding to make sure that everything is all right."

It went on like that for forty minutes. Bill Blanding was sure of just one thing. That Alice Parker was not crazy and that it was up to him to play the part out regardless of how insane it seemed at the moment. At last she told him that he would have to go. She went with him to the door, gave him a long kiss, and pushed him out on to the porch and closed the door.

She stood there until she heard the receding sound of his motor. When she turned Al was standing in the doorway that led to the rear hall.

"Okay, baby," he grinned. "I guess you did all right. You talked like you were a bit excited, but I guess your guy will figure that is over being married tomorrow. Now you can bring in some bedding and park yourself on that sofa for the night—so we can keep an eye on you. We'll camp there in the hall and one of us will be awake every minute. You know what happens if any of you try to pull a trick on us."

Alice Parker lay on that sofa in the dark an hour later and frantically wondered about what was going to happen. Bill Blanding must have thought that she was insane when she had greeted him, a man she had met only once, at the door with a hug and a kiss and talked about marrying him tomorrow. Yet she had seen the change in his eyes later. He had seemed to know that something was wrong.

If Bill heard about that robbery and the abandoned car that was found on the road two miles east he might make some guesses and go to the sheriff. She breathed hard in the darkness as she thought of what would happen if a posse came out and surrounded the house. She had no doubt that these men would kill her at once if that happened. They'd kill her and try to fight their way out.

On the other hand, it was possible that Bill might conclude he had been unfortunate enough to date a girl who had "spells." He might just go on back to Corbin Corners and reason that the best thing for him to do was keep his mouth shut and forget it.

AL AND NICK were doing some hard thinking, too, as they sat in the hall.

"We can't get by this wedding, Al," Nick was arguing in a low voice. "We won't be able to watch so many people. The old man, the old lady, or the girl will have plenty of chances to pass the word along to some of the guests and tell 'em what the set-up is here. Even if the three of 'em play the game with us, something will slip. These hicks will be snooping all over the house and we can't lock ourselves up in a room and let them have it."

"No, we can't," Al chuckled. "I got a better idea. Nick, this plan drops it right in our laps. There'll be a lot of people at this wedding. Some of them are bound to have a little dough on them. Some of them will be driving good cars with good tires and plenty of gas. So here's what we'll do. We'll be the reception committee. We'll meet the guests as they come in."

"What do you mean—meet 'em?"

"We'll shove a gat in their faces as they walk in, Nick. We'll line 'em up and frisk 'em. We ought to get at least two or three hundred bucks out of a crowd like that. Maybe some rocks, too. They'll all be wearing their best. After we frisk 'em, we'll make 'em lie down on the floor and keep quiet. We'll know that there won't be anyone else coming after four, the time of the wedding. So at four o'clock we take the dough we collect, pick out the best car that's parked out in front, and make a fast and clean getaway."

"Clean getaway? They'll all raise the devil the minute we leave."

"No, they won't. There's a nice big cellar under this house with a stairway leading down from the kitchen. We'll herd them all down there and lock 'em in, threaten to shoot anybody that tries to get out. We'll tear that telephone off the wall before we leave. That will give us plenty of time to get on into Stone City before they get word to any cops. All we got to do then is ditch the car and lay low. That friend of yours there will take care of us, won't he?"

"Yeah," Nick whispered. "That's a swell scheme, Al. I gotta hand it to you. You always use your head. We ought to get enough dough off these yaps that are comin' to the weddin' to take care of us for a couple of weeks at least. We'll stick up the weddin' and blow. It'll be a cinch."

It was ten o'clock the next morning. Alice Parker and her mother were decorating the parlor of the farmhouse. The wedding bell was hung and satin streamers made a little bower in the corner of the room. The chairs had even been removed so that there would be plenty of room for the "guests." Alice couldn't be sure that there would not be "guests." If Bill Blanding had gone to the sheriff with his story the sheriff might decide to go through with a phony wedding and send deputies to attend the fake wedding on the chance they would find an opportunity to close in on the gunmen without exposing the women.

Anyway, they had decided to go on with the preparations. They reasoned that the worst thing they could do was to admit the truth to the mobsters, tell them that the carefully preserved dress and decorations had been kept by Mrs. Parker for two years after an elder daughter, together with her fiancé, had been killed in a car accident two days before they were to be married.

Nick and Al kept moving about the house. They were taking no chances

of being surprised. It was Nick who suddenly scowled and frowned as a shiny new coupé turned in from the road.

"Al!" he said. "There's a car comin' in. We gotta get under cover."

"Get rid of 'em!" Al snapped to Alice and her mother. "Get rid of 'em quick! No matter who it is! You can tell 'em you're busy about the wedding."

Alice went to the window and looked. Her eyes widened. "It's Bill," she told them. "The man who was here last night, the man I am going to marry. Just let me—talk to him a moment. I'll make him—go back to town."

BUT Bill Blanding didn't knock this time. Al and Nick had just barely time to get back in the hall as he came charging through the door. The weather had warmed up and Bill had come out without a hat or overcoat. He was grinning now as he grabbed Alice and kissed her.

"You—you shouldn't—" she stammered.

"I know," he laughed. "I shouldn't have come here at this time. I'm only the groom and am supposed to be seen and heard only briefly during the ceremony. But I've got such good news that I had to come right out and tell you about it."

"Wh-at—"

"A wedding present!" Bill boasted. "A wedding present that we never dreamed of getting. Look!"

He reached in his pocket and brought out a roll of bills. He placed them in Alice's hand. "A thousand dollars!" he yelled. "A thousand in cold cash. Uncle George gave it to me this morning. It's his wedding present to us."

Alice stared at the money in her hand. "But—but—" she faltered.

"And that's not all," he went on enthusiastically. "You know my old car is pretty dilapidated. Uncle George

gave me his new coupé to use on our honeymoon. He filled it up with oil and gas and turned it over to me just before I started out here. Isn't that a break?"

"It sure is a break!" Al spoke sardonically, as he stepped into the room. He had a gun in his hand. So did Nick, who was right at his shoulder. "Yeah, it's a break for us, sucker," Al said "And just tough luck for you. Hand over that dough, baby! You, Romeo, get your mitts up high."

Al moved toward Alice while Nick came over and searched Bill Blanding.

"What's the idea?" Bill protested. "Who are—"

"Shut up!" Nick snarled. He jingled some change contemptuously in his hand. "Six bits," he growled. "And a dollar watch. I'll bet we wouldn't get a total of fifty bucks if we stuck up everybody in this township."

"Skip the beef," Al said, as he snatched the roll of bills from Alice. "We got a thousand bucks and a car that's gassed and ready to go. What more do we want? All we've got to do is lock these folks in that cellar and blow. Snap into it. Let's move!"

IT WAS no more than two minutes later when Al and Nick ran out the front door and got in the coupé. Bill Blanding hadn't removed the keys. Nick swung the car out into the highway and turned to the left.

"Hold her to about fifty," Al instructed. "This is a country road and there may be some sharp turns on it."

The car picked up speed. There was a turn after a quarter mile. The road curved to the right and downward sharply. At the foot of the short hill two trucks had been planted crosswise in the road. There were deep ditches on each side.

Nick gasped and slammed on the brakes. The coupé skidded and slith-

ered, barely held the icy road.

"It's a trap!" Al yelled. "We gotta get out into the fields. Jump for it the minute we stop."

They did that. They leaped—and ignored the loud command to halt. Guns roared ahead of them as they tried to leap the ditch. Nick cried out and fell. Al started to bring up his gun, then thought better of it, and held up his hands. . . .

"Well, it worked fine, Bill," the sheriff said, after Bill and the Parkers had been released from the cellar and had gone out into the front yard. "There's your Uncle George's coupé. Not a scratch on it. And here's the thousand he lent you. All there. I counted it when I took it off the tall yegg."

"Bill, how did you guess?" Alice Parker was shaking now in relief, and it seemed quite appropriate for Bill to put his arm around her.

"I didn't at first," he confessed. "I knew something was wrong, of course. But it wasn't until I got home and heard a broadcast about the escaped bandits that I really caught on. I'd passed a ditched car with police around it only a couple of miles from your place and then suddenly all the pieces fell into place. I went to the sheriff and we cooked up this idea."

"It was a lot better than mine," the sheriff said magnanimously. "If we'd gone through a phony wedding and tried to nab them, somebody might've been hurt. They sure fell for that coupé and the thousand bucks."

"This thousand dollars," Bill said awkwardly to Alice a few minutes later, "Uncle George loaned it to me to use as a phony gift. But Uncle George—well, he said—he'd make it a real gift if we ever—"

"We mustn't wait too long then, Bill," Alice Parker said. "Uncle George might change his mind."

Next Month: DESCENT OF A KILIFER—an Exciting Complete Novelet featuring Detective Willie Brann—by BENTON BRADEN

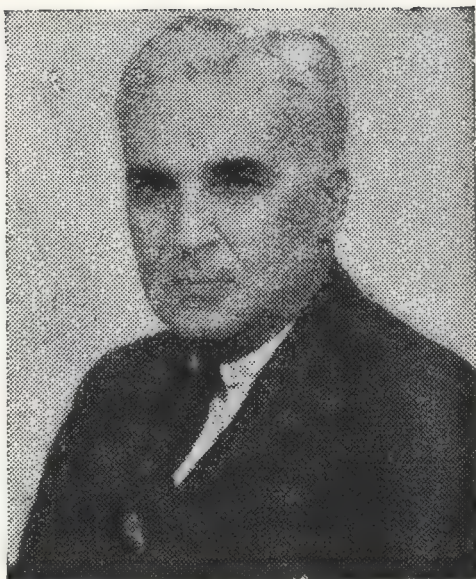
Our Supreme Effort

A MESSAGE FOR THE PEOPLE OF AMERICA

By

PAUL V. McNUTT

*Chairman,
War Manpower Commission*



PAUL V. McNUTT

THIS year 1943 is a year of supreme effort. Not only are the armies of the United Nations facing the crucial test on the battle-fronts of the world, but we here upon the home front are also challenged to effort and sacrifice.

That is why "Everybody in the *right* war job" is our slogan for 1943.

Everybody must be in his or her *right* war job if we are to win the war.

And when you get a war job, stay at it—*every working day*.

Absenteeism, changing from job to job—these cut down production.

If your home is not in a war production center, do not rush to one in search of war work. The war production centers are overcrowded. There are housing shortages. Consult your local office of the United States Employment Service. Ask them whether there is a job and housing for you in a war production center or whether you will be of greater use to the war effort by working where you are, either in your present job or in some more essential job.

During 1943 we expect that one out of every four housewives living near war factories will take a war job. We are urging them to do so. But women living outside areas of war industry, and women with young children under fourteen, should con-

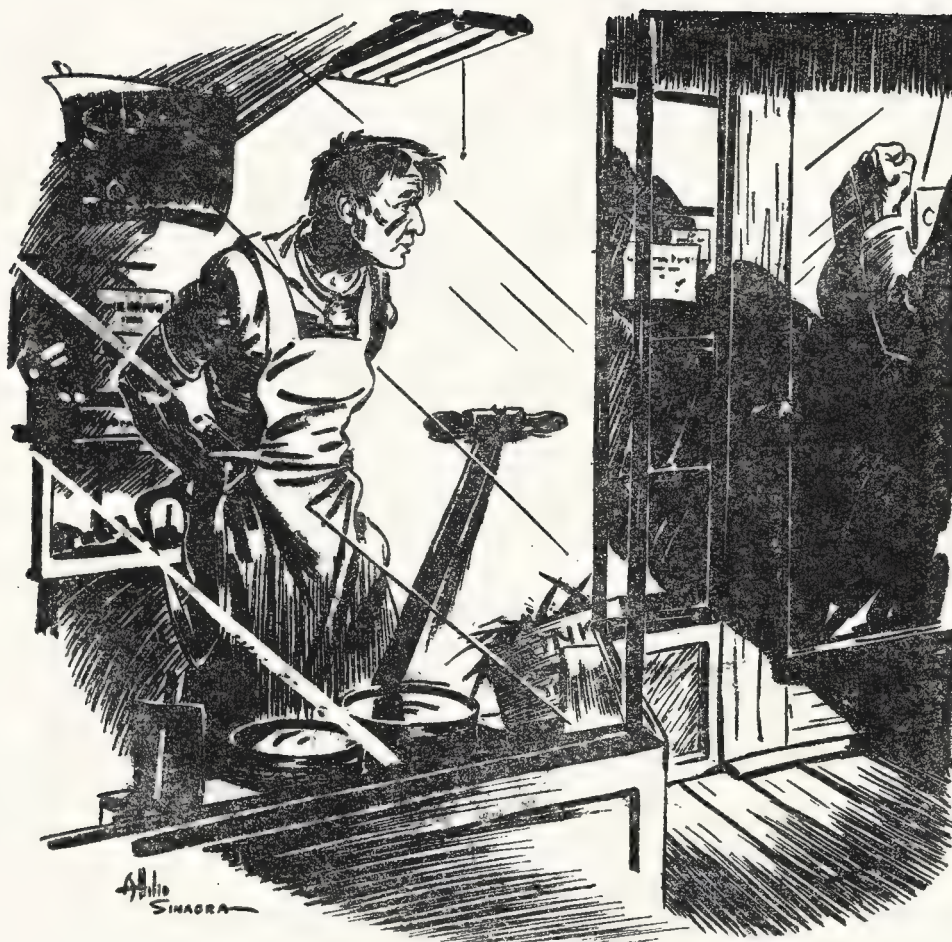
sult their local office of the United States Employment Service to see where their best usefulness lies.

The harvest gathered in 1942 was the greatest in the history of the country. The crop goals for 1943 are even higher than this record production. The War Manpower Commission and the Department of Agriculture are determined that agricultural production shall not be cut down for lack of labor. If you are already on a farm, stay there. There is no place where you could be more useful. If you have a summer vacation, spend it on a farm.

You can make arrangements for part-time or full-time farm work through schools, through county agricultural agents, or through the United States Employment Service. These agencies can tell you where you can get the farm training being offered through the Department of Agriculture in many agricultural colleges.

In industry and agriculture alike, discrimination must end. Age limits must be raised. Handicapped workers must be utilized.

The future of all of us, the future of our children, depend on the work we do now. Only by pulling together, by using all our manpower and womanpower resources, can Victory be achieved.



Mr. Thomas stopped some distance from the door

MR. THOMAS

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Confronted with murder, Mr. Thomas' first reaction was to call the police—and then he remembered he was the police!

MR. THOMAS was dreaming rather absurdly of Caleb Cooper, who was seventy-three years old, when the knocking began on the door below. He slept on, still dreaming. But the knocking repeated itself thunderously. His wife elbowed him awake and he heard the up-rear.

"Be down in a minute," he called sleepily out of a window.

He fumbled into his clothing, eyes half-closed. He did not think of this as possibly an official call for his services as sheriff. He had been elected sheriff, of course, but he matter-of-factly left all the glory and honor and fees of that office to the perennial deputy sheriff,

Mr. Fields, for whose intelligence Mr. Thomas had a great respect.

Mr. Thomas was primarily a merchant, running a general store for the local people, with an increasing trade among the rich summer-home folk on the North Shore. He had no pride of intellect, which was probably a great advantage to him, all things considered.

He stumbled more nearly to wakefulness as he descended the stairs. As he turned on the lights in the store he realized that it was very early indeed. Far too early for this to be a call from one of the North Shore butlers to fill out a critical shortage of bacon or bread or grapefruit. The world outside was dim and ghostly. All outdoor objects were gray and dreary. The lights in the store were highly modern, but now they had the pitiless brightness of arc-lamps.

Mr. Thomas glanced at the clock. Halfpast four in the morning. He grumbled drowsily to himself and moved toward the front door. Then a thought occurred to him on the instant he was wide awake. No honest man wakes a storekeeper at half-past four in the morning!

He resolved not to open the door unless he recognized whoever was on the porch. He had not been sheriff long and had no picture of himself as an enforcer of the law. His election to office had been a vagary of local politics, and he felt no obligation of pride—whether of office or of cleverness—to make him enter into conflict with a possible criminal.

He stopped some distance from the door, frowning uneasily even as he automatically tied his store-apron behind him.

"Who's there?" he called. "What d'you want?"

A FACE pressed against the glass of the door. He recognized it and was at once reassured and shocked. It was Mr. Batterson, the rich attorney, whose butler was one of Mr. Thomas' most-valued patrons.

That was reassuring. But Mr. Batterson's terrible pallor was not. The lawyer's face was drained of blood. He looked like someone who had undergone a dazing and insupportable experience. The glaring white store-lights enhanced his paleness. Mr. Thomas felt a sort of

shocked horror at the sight of a reputable and wealthy customer in a state bordering on collapse.

He fumbled the lock and unchained the door.

"Mr. Batterson! What's the matter?"

Mr. Batterson came into the door, breathing quickly, and had to wet his lips twice before he could speak.

"Haley's been murdered. I—found him. I came to tell you because you are the sheriff."

Then he seemed to stand stock-still, as if he could find no more words. Mr. Thomas gaped at him blankly. No man waked out of a sound sleep to be informed of a murder is at his best. Mr. Thomas felt a stunned helplessness.

He was primarily a merchant, and the first thing that occurred to him was that Mr. Haley always had kidney stew for breakfast on Sunday morning because he came from Baltimore, Maryland. This week's kidneys were in the icebox now.

The second thing was that Deputy Sheriff Fields had gone away to visit his sister. In as law-abiding a community as this, there was nothing improper in a peace-officer taking leave for such a purpose.

The third thing was his own inadequacy for handling such a matter as a murder. In all his life he had only seen one human being who had met a violent death. That had been the result of a hunting accident, and it had caused Mr. Thomas to give up hunting forever.

"I'd better take you to where I found him," said Mr. Batterson huskily. His voice rose in pitch. "My God, Mr. Thomas! It's awful!"

Mr. Thomas made an ineffectual gesture. Instinctively the merchant, he was shocked by the death of one of his best customers, and enormously disturbed by the fact of murder. It took an effort to realize that he was called upon, as sheriff, to take official action. He felt the panicky reluctance of a man required to undertake a task for which he is not fitted.

"I—suppose I'd better come at once," he said inanely. He wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand. Then he said in an awkward beseeching of which he was afterward ashamed: "Mr. Batterson, you are a celebrated lawyer. If you'll advise me a little—"

"Naturally," said Mr. Batterson unsteadily. "I'll do what I can." His voice grew a trifle firmer. "But I'm pretty much upset myself. I liked Haley, you know. But you should look over the scene of the crime as soon as possible."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Thomas. "Of course!"

He fumblingly untied the store-apron from about him. He went upstairs and told his wife. She besieged him with shocked questions while he found his badge and handcuffs, under a vague idea that both were necessary for his official functioning.

"Mr. Batterson found him," said Mr. Thomas harassedly. "I don't know where. I don't know anything, my dear! Look here! As soon as you can, get the State Police barracks on the telephone and ask them to send a couple of men over here to help me. They'll know how to make a proper investigation. I don't!"

THE only item of appropriate behavior that he could think of was the oft-repeated adjuration that nothing should be touched until the police came. But he was the police! Helplessness filled him.

He went down the stairs once more. Mr. Batterson looked up at him, and Mr. Thomas was relieved to notice that the attorney's pallor and the drained look of his face seemed to have abated.

"I'm not a criminal lawyer," said Mr. Batterson, "but if you will be guided by me I think we can manage. I've reason to help all I can, you know. Haley was my friend. We disagreed often enough, but to find him as I did—" His lips twisted bitterly.

Mr. Thomas led the way out of the store. He locked the door behind him, and then noticed that he had left the lights burning. It distressed him to waste light, but he was ashamed to go back. He backed the car out of the garage. Mr. Batterson climbed in and in a rather stern voice told him exactly where to go.

Mr. Thomas was unfeignedly glad that he had a brilliant man like Mr. Batterson to help him. He had no intellectual pride at all. So he found himself thinking as a merchant.

The kidneys in the icebox for Mr. Haley's Sunday morning breakfast

stew. How would he be able to market them now? And also—Mr. Haley's bill was not large. He paid it on the first of every month with exemplary promptness. But it might have to await the settlement of his estate. . . . Then Mr. Thomas was ashamed of so mercantile a point of view.

Mr. Haley's death—leaving his family aside and his bills, too—would make a great deal of difference in the community. For instance, to old Caleb Cooper, of whom he had been dreaming. He would probably relapse into his former state of neglected, bad-tempered senility and hatred for the North Shore residents who lived on acres he had been swindled out of.

In a dutiful attempt to draw some edifying conclusion, Mr. Thomas felt that maybe it would be better to be murdered, like Mr. Haley, than to survive into Caleb Cooper's estate of lonely and poverty-stricken peevishness. But, somehow, he was not convinced of it. He drove his car unskillfully through darkness.

"What—what happened?" he asked presently, staring ahead along the road. "You didn't tell me. Only that Mr. Haley was murdered."

"He was shot," said Mr. Batterson wryly. "He practically died in my arms. To be honest, I'm not very sure about details. I think I must have acted like a fool before I came to you."

MR. THOMAS wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand. His sleeve caught on the sheriff's badge pinned unaccustomedly to his coat.

The headlight beam wavered and bobbed. The car wasn't on a main highway, now, it was on a dirt road which led practically nowhere. There was a vague, dirty-seeming light to eastward. Fences and trees and fields were unearthly and unreal; stark and yet unsubstantial, as things are seen in nightmares.

"I made a long-distance telephone-call last night," said Mr. Batterson huskily, "and found that I had to be in the city by half-past seven this morning. I'd have to start very early even by car, and we're all trying to save tires these days, so I determined to catch the four o'clock train.

"I got up at three and started to walk

to the station. I took a short cut across Haley's place. It was chilly and I felt depressed and sleepy. I turned up my topcoat collar and tramped along, thinking rather resentfully of the business that put me to so much inconvenience. And suddenly I stumbled over something."

He shuddered. Mr. Thomas knew that his face was white and sick.

"I fell over it," said Mr. Batterson, his voice thin "and it groaned! My God! . . . I almost ran away. But I struck a match, and—have you ever seen one of your friends shot to death? That's what I saw. It is much more horrible than I knew anything could be."

Mr. Thomas winced.

"My friend Haley lay there," said Batterson grimly. "It was seconds before I recognized him. Then I called his name, urgently, and he opened his eyes. I acted quite insanely, Mr. Thomas. I asked him if he was badly hurt!"

"He managed to ask for water, and said, 'Caleb Cooper shot me. The old fool didn't know what he was doing. He's old and cracked. I'm horribly thirsty—' Somehow, the look on his face as he asked for water would have melted a stone.

"I went crazily looking for water to bring him—for a brook or something. It was absurd! I wasted time! I knew enough first-aid to know better than to try to move him, so when I realized what a fool I was, I went back and told him hastily that I'd get water and a doctor at the nearest house.

"But he didn't answer. His face had changed, somehow. I knew, the instant I lit a second match. He was dead. He'd died while I ran foolishly about trying to find a brook in an open field!"

The car lurched and bumped along the road.

"My legal training came back to me then." The lawyer smiled bitterly. "I acquired a wholly false composure. The legal authorities should be notified. The body should not be touched. So I came to you, and only now realize how inhuman it was to think of those things instead of poor Haley's family.

"They still don't know that anything has happened to him. He must have been wounded early in the night. He must have lain there for hours, helplessly, while his life ebbed away. I

imagine that I found him about half-past three. At four he was dead, and I started to find you."

Mr. Thomas was very pale. Paler than at any previous time since the knock on his door. He felt that he ought to comment because Mr. Batterson was a celebrated man, and he would think it strange if he did not.

"We're about there now," he said through dry lips.

HE turned off the road and stopped the car. There was a gate, and he opened it and closed it behind him after the shaken lawyer had passed through. The light was a little stronger, now. This was a pasture, close-cropped, with here and there little rounded tufts of clover not yet grazed down.

The light made all the earth look grayish, because there were innumerable droplets of dew upon the ground and on every grass-blade. Mr. Batterson pointed with a suddenly shaking hand.

"My footprints," he said unsteadily. "If we follow them—"

There were irregular, solidly-wetted blotches on the grayish coating of water-drops. They were far apart, as if the man who had made them was running. Mr. Thomas followed their line with his eyes. He wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

Presently the two men stood above a huddled object on the ground.

"I put my topcoat over him, Mr. Thomas, when I started for you. It seemed little enough to do?"

Mr. Thomas was reluctant, but he was the duly elected sheriff. He had no intellectual pride, but he had a sense of duty. Therefore, he forced himself to turn back a part of the coat and look at what was beneath it.

He struck a match for light, and found himself wondering with a wild irrelevance why the fact that Mr. Haley came from Baltimore, Maryland, impelled him to eat kidney stew for his Sunday breakfast. There were other irrelevancies in his mind, too, which he felt almost certainly incompetent to organize into reason.

But he forced himself to look, without any vanity about possible ability to make elaborate deductions. He could only see what was before his eyes, but he must try to see that clearly, despite

Mr. Batterson's fame and brilliancy that made his own efforts puny by comparison.

The lawyer plucked at his sleeve.

"There are more of my tracks," said Mr. Batterson, pointing insistently. "You can see where I came and stumbled over him, and where I went off in that silly search for water. I came back this way and found that he was already gone. And I knelt down beside him and tried to help. Then I came for you."

Mr. Thomas swallowed and nodded. But because of his insistence, Mr. Batterson did not seem as important or as impressive as before. There is a queer dignity of the dead, which the living cannot match. Mr. Thomas felt painfully unsure of himself, but the evidence Mr. Batterson had given fitted together perfectly.

"Now, this Caleb Cooper," said Mr. Batterson bitterly, "he killed Haley. Haley told me so. And what's to be done about it? He's an old man, doddering and senile, with delusions that he was cheated of the property on which all the North Shore houses are built. He hates all of us, because of his delusion. One cannot hate him in return, but nevertheless, he killed my friend Haley—"

Mr. Thomas put back the topcoat and stood up. He shivered.

"I've played a rather ignoble and foolish part so far," said Batterson. "I'd like to redeem myself in my own eyes. This old man must be taken into custody. No one can know what is going on in his disordered brain. He may be sleeping peacefully, like a child. But maybe he is desperate because of the murder he has done, or perhaps his delusions have turned to mania. He may be planning to kill others before the police hunt him down. I'd like to go and bring him into custody, Mr. Thomas. Could you deputize me? I promise not to harm him."

MR. THOMAS shook his head slightly. The increasing gray light of dawn was all about him. He had been dreaming of Caleb Cooper when his wife elbowed him into this nightmarish situation.

"I know his cottage," said Mr. Batterson. "I might be able to persuade him."

Mr. Thomas wiped sweat from his forehead again.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Batterson," he said unsteadily. "He thinks he was swindled once, and he is a stickler for his legal rights because of it. He's only a stubborn and feeble old man, but he'll fight like a wildcat if anyone tries to take him from his house by force. He'll obey a warrant, though. The law means justice to him. I've got to get a warrant."

"A warrant? He may be old, but he is mad and he is armed! No one can tell what he might do! I think you are making a mistake."

"N-no, Mr. Batterson," said Mr. Thomas painfully. "I know my neighbors pretty well. You can't trade with people for twenty years without knowing them pretty well. I'm going back to get a warrant."

He bent over to adjust the topcoat which served as a cover. It was not quite adequate. It did not cover an out-flung hand. Mr. Thomas tried to fold that hand decorously over Mr. Haley's breast. It resisted. Mr. Thomas went still paler. A dead hand's resistance to a reverent gesture was somehow shocking.

He stood up and strode shakenly away toward the car, his features twisted a little. After five yards, the lawyer followed him. As they reached the gate of this pasture, Mr. Thomas wiped his forehead.

"I never thought being sheriff would include anything like this!" he said shakenly. "It hurts, Mr. Batterson. I don't know what to do!"

He spoke jerkily, as if to conceal a vast inner unease. There was a hint of color in the east, now, and the merchant's face was clearly visible. He was much paler than the lawyer.

He started the car and drove back toward his store. The tints to eastward deepened in color. The roof of the store appeared. Then the store itself, still brightly illuminated from within, its artificial lights competing successfully with a yet uncompleted sunrise.

There was a stocky small car before the store, now. It had a tall, whiplike radio aerial. A man in uniform pounded at the store's door.

"State troopers," said Mr. Thomas, relievedly. "My wife telephoned for them. I was going to ask you to wait, anyhow, and if you are willing to do so,

all I have to do is get the warrant. I want to do the right thing in the right way.

"Will you explain the thing to them, Mr. Batterson? I'll get the warrant down the street. The justice of the peace is only a few doors away."

He stopped the car and said through the window to the nearer trooper:

"I'm the sheriff, and I'm going to ask you two men to help me make an arrest. I'm going after the warrant now. Mr. Batterson, here, reported the murder and he'll tell you about it."

Batterson got out of the car. Mr. Thomas drove on down the street. He wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

WHEN he came back, the sun was just barely above the horizon. The store was open. His wife had opened it. Batterson was at the end of his narrative.

"—I shall be glad to guide you to the poor old devil's cottage. Ah! The sheriff is back with the warrant!"

Mr. Thomas fumbled with the folded paper in his hand. His fingers shook a little. He spoke to the troopers.

"I'm sorry I was so long. The warrant's here. . . ." He held it out.

The nearest trooper glanced at it, and then glanced quickly back. His face became veiled. Silently, he handed it to the other trooper. They looked at Mr. Thomas: He looked acutely unhappy.

"Mr. Batterson has told you about the case, I'm sure," he said apologetically, "and I may have bungled. I'm not a proper law-officer. We have a very good deputy sheriff here, but he's away just now. So I may not have handled things properly. Mr. Batterson is a celebrated lawyer, and he's dissatisfied, but I—felt I had to do what I thought was right."

"We only disagreed," said the lawyer, "about the amount of haste called for in the arrest of the old man, Caleb Cooper. As a madman, however feeble, I insisted that he should be confined at once because he is armed."

"Yes," said Mr. Thomas, very awkwardly. "I wanted to do something else first. Mr. Batterson told you, gentlemen, that Caleb Cooper was named as the murderer by Mr. Haley? And he told you that Mr. Haley actually died about four o'clock, an hour ago, now?"

[Turn page]

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"I told them that," said the lawyer impatiently. "Of course."

"I want," said Mr. Thomas unhappily, "to look at the rug in your study, Mr. Batterson. You see, your butler deals at my store, and he tells me that when you are worried about anything, you take long walks and then come back and pace up and down your study without wiping your feet. He has a terrible time keeping the rug in your study clean. So I want to have these gentlemen look at the rug before your butler has a chance to clean it. If it isn't dirty, I'll apologize most heartily, Mr. Batterson."

"Apologize for what?" demanded Batterson. He was unfeignedly bewildered.

"For arresting you for Mr. Haley's murder," said Mr. Thomas, more unhappily still. "You see, Mr. Batterson, one of my friends was killed by the accidental discharge of a rifle about twenty years ago, and the wound looked exactly like Mr. Haley's injury. The bullet pierced my friend's windpipe and he was never able to make a sound."

"And one of Mr. Haley's hands wasn't covered by the overcoat you threw over his body, and I tried to—compose him, and I couldn't. *Rigor mortis*—" Mr. Thomas fumbled over the word—"had set in."

"And my grandmother, who used to lay out people when they died in the neighborhood up to about fifty years ago, told me that a body can be composed up to about six hours after death, but not later. So Mr. Haley must have died at least five hours before you say, and he probably never uttered a sound after he was shot. Besides—"

IT TOOK courage for a mere storekeeper to contradict a celebrated man like Mr. Batterson. A man with intellectual pride would never have risked humiliation by a greater intellect. But Mr. Thomas felt an obligation imposed upon him by the office he was not fitted to discharge, and he doggedly went on.

"That field was limed ten years ago. But the lime-company swindled on the lime. Instead of good, fat lime, somebody shipped plaster-of-paris that had gone bad. There was a lawsuit about it. So—well—if you met Mr. Haley and quarreled with him and then shot him

without intending to, it would have worried you badly, Mr. Batterson.

"You would have gone back to your study and paced up and down, thinking out desperately some way to clear yourself. And the mud on your study rug will have plaster-of-paris in it."

Mr. Batterson said in an extraordinarily composed tone:

"Mr. Thomas, I had thought of that doddering Caleb Cooper as a madman, but I think you surpass him! What reason would I have—"

"I haven't the least idea," said Mr. Thomas desperately. "Indeed I haven't! If I were a proper sheriff, I would understand it all. But I don't! You're such a clever man, Mr. Batterson, that I'm sure you can explain everything. You explained everything right at the beginning."

"If you hadn't made such a perfect story, Mr. Batterson, I'd never have dreamed of accusing you. But when you say that Mr. Haley named old Caleb Cooper as his murderer, I knew that couldn't be. Mr. Haley would never have said that! Never!"

The expression on the face of the lawyer was the very perfection of incredulity.

"And will you please tell me, Mr. Thomas, why not?"

"Because," said Mr. Thomas miserably, "because Mr. Haley has been paying for treatments for Caleb Cooper's arthritis, and he knew that the old man can just barely hold a fork in his hand to feed himself, and can't use a knife, and couldn't possibly pull the trigger of a revolver."

The lawyer turned to the two State troopers, shrugging.

"I imagine," he said ironically, "that the warrant he swore out is for me. Will you arrest me, please, and take me before a magistrate who is not altogether insane too, so that I can arrange bail and go about my business?"

But Mr. Thomas said doggedly:

"I hate to ask it but—please search him first. He wanted to be deputized to arrest Caleb. He wanted to go with me to the old man's cottage to help arrest him. Then he was going to guide you. I think you'll find that he has something out of Mr. Haley's pockets—maybe his wallet—or maybe the gun that he killed Mr. Haley with, that he

intended to leave in that cottage to be found. . . ."

The two State troopers moved simultaneously. And then the lawyer began to fight. He fought with the fury of a madman.

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK—three hours later—Mr. Thomas waited upon a customer in his store. The customer was the butler for one of the North Shore families. He said confidentially:

"I hear that the real reason was that Mr. Haley, bein' interested in the Cooper person because of 'elping him pay for treatments for his arthritis, 'ad found a bit of scoundrelism in the way the old chap lost his land. He was going to sue Mr. Batterson on the old chap's be'alf. And Mr. Batterson would've been ruined. It seems he was the syndicate which developed the entire North Shore."

"Ah!" said Mr. Thomas interestedly. "I didn't know that!"

"A clever chap, that Batterson," said the butler, sagely. "He figured that if he pinned the murder on the old fellow—I doubt that he'd meant to do it at first—that the Cooper person would be made out a madman who'd first deceived and then murdered Mr. Haley. And they tell me he very near managed it, too!"

Mr. Thomas said, "Tch! Tch! Tch!" He had no intellectual pride which required gratification. He had only a sense of duty, which had forced him to do his best with a job he felt quite unfitted to undertake.

"Are you sure there's nothing else you'll need today?"

The butler considered.

"I've a problem," admitted the butler, accepting the change of subject. "There's a guest from Baltimore, Maryland, at the house for the weekend. I don't know his tastes at all."

Mr. Thomas' face brightened. Now he felt competent.

"He'll want hot rolls," said Mr. Thomas, "and sooner or later he will want fresh mint to show how juleps are made. But you'd like to astonish him?"

The butler nodded, thoughtfully.

"Give him kidney stew for Sunday breakfast," said Mr. Thomas authoritatively. "Serve him kidney stew! I've a pair of kidneys for the purpose."

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Yeah, I confessed. No, they didn't sweat me. Why should they? Didn't I take half the city into my confidence, tell them I killed Gessi and Wali, and beg them to hurry and get the cops?

I didn't even have that heist planned. I'd just blown into town the night before and was walking around, looking things over. I happened to be passing that delicatessen of Tony Gessi's, and glanced in for no reason at all. Just to rest my eyes from the glare of the sidewalk. It was about nine A. M. and already hot as the seat's gonna be.

Anyway, through the window I could see a big Italian in there counting the biggest roll of lettuce I'd seen since I pulled off—but that doesn't matter.

I had my rod with me, and like a flash it popped into my skull that this

was made to my order. There was very few people on the street. The Italian had just opened up, and the joint was shy of customers.

Almost before I knew it, I was inside, and the Italian was gaping at my rod in a slack-jawed manner. I had the roll of lettuce in my pocket before his mouth closed.

"Why you take my monies?" he asked, his eyes getting hot. "I bring the monies from home. When clerk comes, I go to postoffice, and buy war bonds. Dat Mussolini! Dat bum! I show 'im!"

"Quiet!" I snapped, casing the street. "Lie down behind that counter, and take a nap. And don't get up!"

But he really must have had a grudge again *Il Duce*, and wanted his five grand to go to the right place. He vaulted that counter before I could swallow, and swung a mitt as big as one of the smoked hams on the hooks. I tried to duck, but a block-buster exploded in my eye and I slammed back against the wall.

Through a shower of exploding comets I saw him snatch up a cleaver, and take aim. There was one thing I could do. I did it. He went down, blood pouring from his mouth and nose. I ran out the back way, my eardrums bursting. That stubby .38 made a racket indoors.

I GOT to the other side of town I O. K. My room was close to the waterfront, so I started there. My eye was giving me a picnic. I went in a bar, and ordered a Rock and Rye.

"Looks like you come out on the short end, friend," the barkeep grinned, shooting my alky over.

"Yeah?" I said. He jerked his thumb at the mirror behind him. I looked, and was not pleased with what I saw. That Italian's fist had given me an almost perfect shiner.

"Ha, ha," I joked, "I ran into a door in the dark."

But I didn't feel humorous. A black eye attracts people's attention, makes you stand out in the mob. And with five grand in hot dough and a rod on me, I didn't care for the eyes of the public.

The barkeep was quite a wit.

"I know how it is, friend," he said, "I'm married myself."

"Great, ain't it," I grinned.

"You bet," he agreed, unenthusiastically. Then he leaned across the bar and got confidential.

"This here is a respectable joint," he exaggerated, "but some of the boys who come in work at the docks. They play rough sometimes. Just around the corner there's a little drugstore. Old Doc Wall runs it. He fixes shiners for two bucks, so good you can't tell you had one."

"Thanks," I said, interested. "Might look him up."

I finished my drink, left half a buck for the barkeep, and went around to Doc Wall's drugstore. He was a pudgy little man. About my height, five-six, but twice as heavy. He came towards me, beaming. A radio was giving out breakfast music on the counter.

"A beauty!" he announced, before I could start beating my own drums. "The prettiest one I've seen since Sailor Murphy."

[Turn page]

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"Can you fix it?" I snapped.

"Come with me."

He led me through a partition in the rear. There was a big skylight in the roof. I sat down in a chair, and watched him take some long, dark, sinister things out of a bucket.

"Leeches," he explained. "They'll draw the bruised blood from the tissues, then I'll paint the darkened skin in natural flesh tints. When I finish, your eye will look as good as new."

That was O. K. with me. I admit my stomach went squeamy when he hung those blood-suckers on me, but I didn't kick. They dropped off when they got a bellyful, and I fingered my eye. The swelling had gone, entirely.

Doc Wall took some bottles off a shelf and mixed up some paint that was so near the color of my hide that when he put a drop on my wrist, I swear I couldn't see it.

He started painting my eye with a little brush. Once or twice customers came in, and he waddled up front to wait on them.

It took a half hour for him to blend the paint into my skin to his liking. Just as he was about ready to put on the finishing touches, I felt him stiffen. I glanced up into his bright little eyes. There was a funny look on his face.

Then, suddenly, I got it. That radio up front had been playing all this time, but I'd been so interested in what the Doc was doing I hadn't noticed. The music had stopped, and a newscast had come on. The announcer was spiling:

"We repeat. Have you seen a man with a black eye? The police have announced that Mr. Tony Gessi was fatally wounded in his delicatessen by a holdup man at nine A. M. today. Although he died before he could describe his assailant, Mr. Gessi stated that he hit the bandit in the eye. Five thousand—"

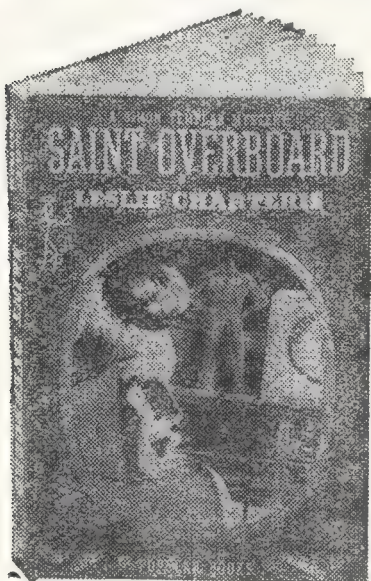
THE Doc and I stared at each other. My hand had slipped inside my coat in a casual manner. The Doc coughed.

"Probably that Steve Cheney," he said, continuing his work. "Too bad about Gessi."

(Continued on page 92)

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CONFESSION IN WRITING

(Continued from page 90)

"Yeah, ain't it?" I agreed, but I kept my hand in my coat. I knew he knew, and I was pretty sure he knew I knew. I became positive of it a few seconds later. Little drops of sweat squeezed out of Doc's jowls. His hands trembled so that he dropped the bowl of paint.

"I—I'll have to get another bottle of white out of stock," he said. "I've used all I have here." The words didn't come out easy.

"I'll go with you, Doc," I agreed casually. "It's kinda lonesome by myself."

I kept close behind him, my eye straining for a wrong move. He didn't try anything, just cast a sort of hopeless look out through the plate-glass front. He took a bottle of paint off a shelf that had a sign saying "Paints and Colors." We went back.

I watched him like a hawk as he mixed up a new batch. He used some of the white and some pink and yellow and tan and red.

He seemed calmer now that he knew what was coming. You see, I'd quit pretending and pulled my rod. I kept it in his jumpy belly all the time that he was putting the finish-

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ing touches on my shiner.

His brush made little quick light strokes around my eye, then he sighed, handed me a mirror, and stood back.

"It's finished," he said in a dull voice. "That's the best I can do."

I got up, wiggled my rod warningly, and shot a quick peep in the glass.

I was surprised, really surprised. It was bright as day right under that skylight, but not counting my eye being a trifle more bloodshot than usual, it was perfect.

"That's a good job, Doc." I threw a couple of dollar bills at him. "There's your pay—and here's a bonus!" I raised my rod.

He clutched at the usual straw, tried to run in on me, grab me. That's what I wanted. I buried my rod in

[Turn page]



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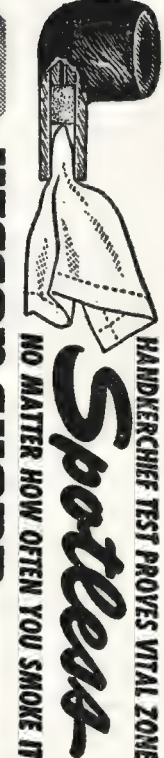
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his spongy belly, and pulled the trigger. It was better than a silencer.

I went to the front, waited till no one was passing, then eased out. I took my time going away from there. The cops were looking for a guy with a black eye. I didn't have one.

Even when that barkeep tipped the cops off, all he could tell them was that a little guy in a gray suit, if he remembered that much, went to Doc Wall's to get a shiner fixed. There are lots of little guys *without* shiners, and I could get rid of the gray suit—which I proceeded to do back in my room.

I laid around all afternoon, smoking and suffering from being with myself so much.

About five, I went out and bought a paper. It was all in there. They had found Doc Wall, stone-stiff. The barkeep had shot off his mouth, but he had remembered even less than I expected. The cops were now on the lookout for a powerfully-built, blazing-eyed double-killer, around six feet tall.

My pals tell me I look like a rabbit.

I laughed, carried a pint of Rock and Rye back to my room, and killed time till nine P. M. Then I got my bag, gave a last admiring look at Doc Wall's craftsmanship in the mirror,

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and turned out the light. The fierce, blazing-eyed killer was on his way out of town.

I DIDN'T see a cab in front of the rooming-house, so I set out to walk the dozen blocks to the bus station. It was pretty dark between the corner street lights, but I still couldn't see how that was any reason for the first person I passed close to, which was a dame, to let out a screech that made my teeth chatter, and flatten herself on the concrete.

[Turn page]

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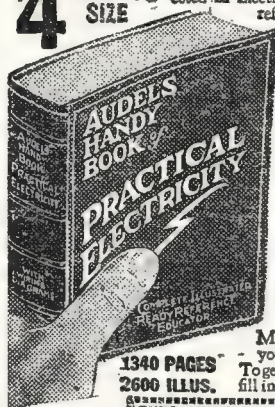
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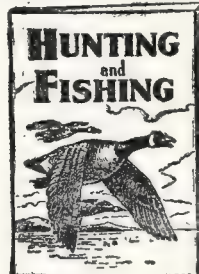
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I passed several more citizens, all of whom my proximity affected in various ways, consisting mainly of stampeding away from the vicinity. I wondered who was squirrely.

They put the bracelets on me in the fourth block. The prowler car had circled round a back way, and the cops were behind a hedge in front of a church. It was real dark there, and I didn't see them till they had their rods in my guts and was frisking me.

Well, that's all. They took the hot dough and rod off me, so I got the chair.

Oh, you want it all in my own words, eh? O. K.

Doc Wall knew I wasn't going to leave him there to wag his jaw to the cops, so when he went up front to get some more white paint he got luminous paint. That's what they use on light switches and things, so they can see them at night. It looks white in the light, but it shines in the dark. He mixed some of that luminous paint in with the flesh color.

And when I thought he was putting the finishing touches to my shiner, he was writing just above my eye: **I KILLED.**

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HEADQUARTERS (Concluded from page 10)

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You didn't mention which story you had reference to, Luke, so I can't argue with you. But perhaps you have something there in general, and I present it to the rest of the readers, inviting their further comment. Are the detective story writers of today getting too elementary in their explanations? What do you others think about it? We'd be mighty glad down here at Headquarters for you to write in and express your opinions.

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—THE EDITOR.

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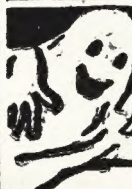
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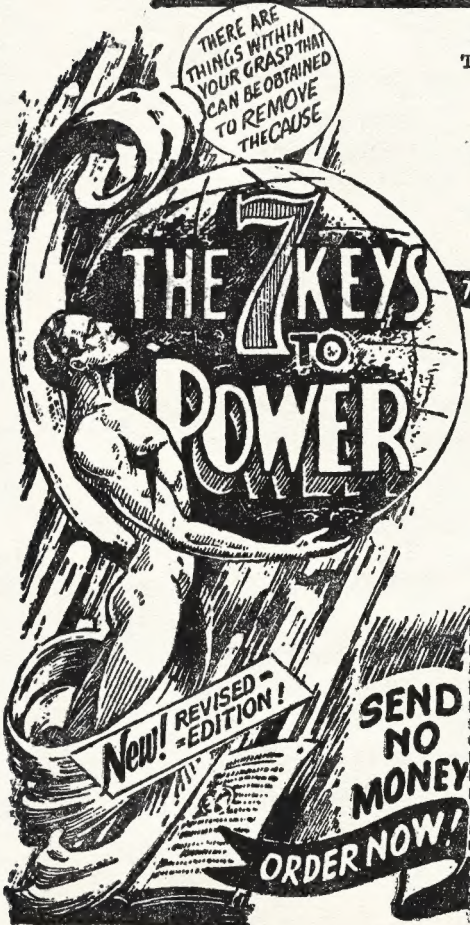
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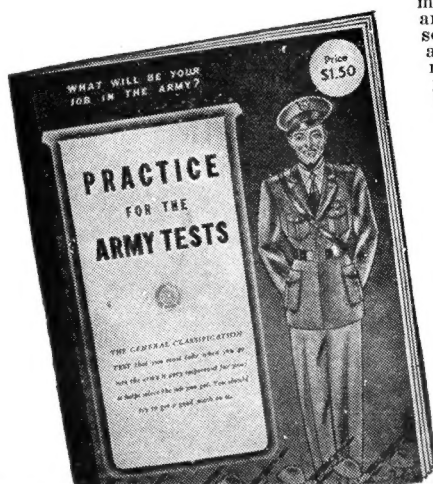
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FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

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The germ that causes the disease is known as *Tinea Trichophyton*. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ *Tinea Trichophyton* within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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